

Jacqueline Wilson

# Lola Rose



Illustrated by Nick Sharratt









# Lola Rose

I wonder if you've ever wished you were someone else? If you had a different name, would you take on a whole new identity? Jayni in this book is mousy and doesn't have many friends and she often gets scared. She has good reason to be scared too, because her dad can suddenly lose his temper and become terrifyingly violent. He beats Nicky, Jayni's mum, but then one day he knocks Jayni to the ground too, and that gives them the courage to run away from him.

Nicky and Jayni and little brother Kenny hide in London, starting a new life with the aid of a lucky lottery ticket. They feel their luck has changed. Nicky calls herself Vicky Luck now, Kenny swops his name to Kendall, and Jayne selects the most glamorous name she can find for herself, Lola Rose. She feels instantly more stylish, the sort of girl who isn't scared of anything.

But I'm afraid there are all sorts of scary things still ahead of poor Lola Rose. Vicky gets breast cancer and is very ill. I'd wondered about writing a book where a



LOLA ROSE  
A CORGI BOOK 978 0 552 55613 2

First published in Great Britain by Doubleday  
an imprint of Random House Children's Books

Doubleday edition published 2003  
First Corgi Yearling edition published 2004  
This Corgi Yearling edition published 2007

7 9 10 8

Copyright © Jacqueline Wilson, 2003  
Illustrations copyright © Nick Sharratt, 2003

The right of Jacqueline Wilson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: [www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm)

THE RANDOM HOUSE GROUP Limited Reg. No. 954009  
[www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk](http://www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk)

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at: [www.rbooks.co.uk/environment](http://www.rbooks.co.uk/environment).

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

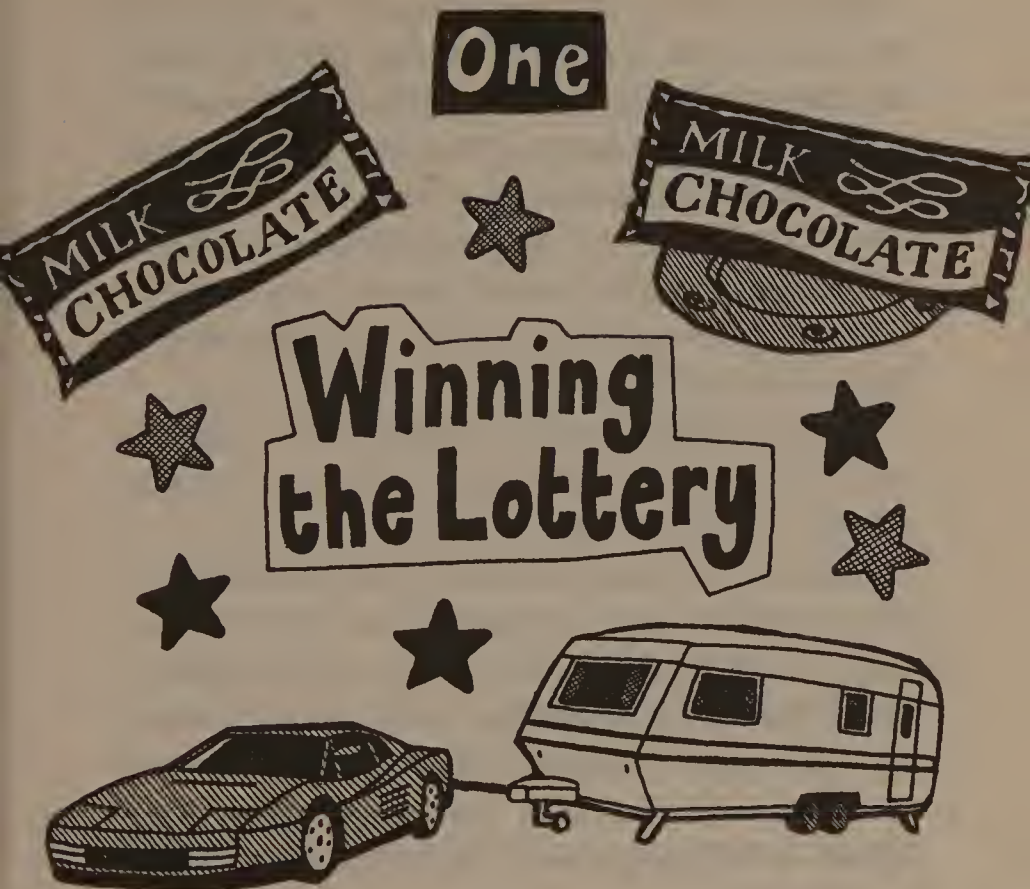


*In memory of Zoe Biller  
a very special girl*









Have you ever wondered what you'd do if you won the lottery?

My mum won. She did, really. OK, she didn't win the jackpot. We don't live in a great big mansion. I wouldn't want to even if Mum had won mega-millions. I'd hate to live in a big house with heaps of rooms. You'd never be able to keep track of everyone. Someone could be creeping along the corridor ready to get you and you'd never know.

I'd like a really small house. A caravan would be even better. It could be ultra-luxurious, with purple velvet fitted sofas and matching purple curtains



and purple satin sheets on the bunk beds. We could even have a huge purple glass plate piled high with big purple bars of Cadbury's milk chocolate for us to nibble on any time we fancy. But it would have this never-fail alarm system if anyone approached. Then I'd strap Kenny and me to the sofa and Mum would jump in the purple Ferrari permanently hooked to the caravan and whizz us off to safety at hundreds of miles an hour.

Mum didn't win the lottery on the television. She won with a scratch card. I'm not talking ten pounds though. *Ten thousand!*

She looked at the card in the street and she gave this great whoop. She picked my little brother Kenny up and whirled him round and round until he squealed. She couldn't pick me up too because my mum's quite little and I'm big for my age, but she gave me a huge hug and kissed me on both cheeks and then on the tip of my nose too, which made me giggle.

'Right, let's get back inside the shop,' she said. 'We're going to spend spend spend! Only don't tell old Sid behind the counter. He's such a gossip he'll tell everyone on the whole estate and then the next time we're down the pub we'll be buying drinks all round for people we haven't met before.'

'Right, Mum,' I said. I gave Kenny a little nudge. 'Are you taking this in, chum? Keep that little lip zipped.'

Kenny giggled and acted out zipping his lip. Then we went back in the shop.

'Come for another scratch card, Nikki?' said old



Sid, shaking his head. 'You mums and your lottery cards!'

'Yeah, right, tragic, isn't it?' said Mum. 'And no one round here ever wins, do they?'

She caught my eye and grinned. Kenny grinned too. He opened his mouth.

'Zip!' I hissed, and hustled him over to the ice-cream cabinet.

'I've decided to pack in buying scratch cards altogether,' said Mum. 'So I'm going to spend my lottery money on treats for the kids. OK, Jayni, Kenny, what are you having?'

I chose a white Magnum and a tube of Rolos and a packet of marshmallows and a giant bar of Cadbury's fruit and nut and a bottle of Coke and a *Girltalk* and a *Doll Collector* and a *Puppies and Kittens* because they all have good pictures for my scrapbook.

Kenny chose a small red ice lolly and a *Thomas the Tank Engine* comic.

'You can have more than that, Kenny. Anything. Sweets, chocolate, more comics, whatever you want.'

'I don't want whatever. I want my lolly and my comic, like always,' said Kenny.

'But you can choose *more*, Kenny.'

'I can't choose,' said Kenny, starting to sound upset.

'Oh, leave him be, Jayni,' said Mum.

She had no problem choosing a *Hello!* and an *OK!* and a *Cosmo* and a big fat *Vogue* and a bottle of diet Coke and a large pack of posh ciggies.



'I thought you were buying treats for the kids,' said Sid.

'Yeah, well, I'm a kid at heart too,' said Mum, paying him.

She used up nearly all the money in her purse but she'd get the £10,000 soon and then we'd be laughing.

'I should be so lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky,' Mum sang, to the old Kylie song. She did a little dance, shaking her hips and sticking her chest out, twirling Sid's carrier bag full of goodies. She took Kenny's hand and mine and made us dance too, even though it was hard for us to hang onto our ice creams. Kenny nearly stuck his lolly up his nose every time he tried to take a lick.

A lorry driver hooted when he saw Mum dancing. He yelled something and Mum laughed and waggled her bum at him.

I just love it when Mum laughs. She tosses her soft blonde hair and opens her mouth and shows all her lovely white teeth. They're little and even and pearly white even though she smokes lots of fags. She doesn't have any fillings. I've got five already.

Mum turns heaps of heads even when she's not dancing around. She did a bit of modelling when she was younger. She's got her own scrapbook with pages cut out of newspapers and magazines. We're not supposed to look, Kenny and me, because Mum isn't wearing a lot and some of the poses are quite sexy.

I've tried locking the bathroom door and



stripping down to my knickers and trying out some of those poses myself. I look *ridiculous*. I'm as tall as my mum but I haven't got a proper figure. It doesn't go in and out in the right places. My hair's wrong too, even though I've grown it past my shoulders at long last. It's boring old mouse and Mum says I can't have it highlighted her colour blonde until I'm a teenager. It costs a fortune to have it done properly.

Up until the day Mum won the lottery we were always strapped for cash. Mum had to stop modelling when she got married because Dad didn't like it.

'I'm not having other guys ogling my wife,' he said. 'You're giving it up, Nikki, understand?'

Mum understood. You don't argue with my dad.

I wondered if Mum was going to tell Dad about the lottery money. I knew we should keep our mouths zipped with him too. But Mum was so so so stupid when it came to dealing with Dad. She'd do anything for him, give him anything, do exactly what he said. It was partly because she was scared of him. But it was also because she was still crazy about him. He's so good-looking, my dad, lean and tall, with deep blue eyes and a great tangle of black, wavy hair. Everyone thinks he looks incredible, it's not just us. Lots of the women on our estate were nuts about him. Even some of the girls at school acted like he was a rock star.

He was once. Well, he used to sing in this band, the Mad Beggars. They didn't make any actual albums but they sold their own tapes at all their



gigs. They played in pubs and clubs all over the city.

Mum went along one night with her mates and stood at the front, right underneath my dad on the stage.

‘And I fell in love, *whoomph*, just like that,’ Mum said, snapping her fingers.

Dad was the one who snapped his fingers. She went off with him that night. She’s been with him ever since.

Dad’s band broke up after a year or so. Dad had a fight with the lead guitarist. It looked like Dad and Mum might break up too because Dad didn’t really want to be tied down with a steady girlfriend. But Mum told him I was on the way.

‘You brought us together again, Jayni,’ she said.

That’s why my name’s spelt in such a weird way. They called me after both of them. My dad’s called Jay and Mum’s Nikki.

I might have brought them together but I cried a lot as a kid and it got on my dad’s nerves so he cleared off once or twice. Then Mum cried a lot too. She loved him so much even though he’d started hitting her by this time. She hit back at first but then he hit harder.

He hit other people too. He ended up doing time in prison for GBH. We went to see him once a month, Mum and me. I remember he was very sweet to us then. He made a big fuss of me, telling me I was his pretty little princess, though I was this plain, podgy kid with no front teeth at that stage. That’s the really scary thing about my dad. He can



make you feel so special – but he can also smash your face in.

I knew it was wicked but I wished he could stay in prison for ever. He was safe behind bars and we were safe at home. But he got out eventually, even though he had to serve his full term because he kept getting into fights.

For a week or so it was like Mum and Dad were on their second honeymoon. Dad made a big fuss of me too. He bought Mum a huge bouquet of red roses and he bought me a big bunch of purple freesias. He bought Mum a bottle of pink champagne with a pink ribbon round it and he bought me a bottle of Ribena with a purple ribbon. He bought Mum a huge box of white cream chocolates and he bought me a giant bar of Cadbury's, so big I could hardly hold it in my two hands. But it all started to go wrong when I was only halfway through the chocolate.

Dad thought Mum was flaunting herself when they went out to this club and he hit her when they got home. He started to hit her if a man so much as looked at her. He was convinced she'd had all these boyfriends when he was in prison.

He'd ask me about it, over and over. He shouted with his face up really close so his spit sprayed all over me. I told him that Mum only had eyes for him but he wouldn't believe me. He went on hitting Mum even though she was now pregnant with Kenny.

Mum called him Kenneth, after her dad. This was a bit weird of her, because we never ever went



to visit my grandad or grandma or Mum's older sister, Auntie Barbara. Grandad told Mum he never wanted to see her again when she went off with Dad. He said she was throwing herself away. He insisted my dad was Trouble with a capital T.

I suppose my grandad was right. But he was wrong the way he treated Mum. And us. He didn't want to see Kenny even though he was named after him. He didn't even say much to Mum and Kenny and me when we went to see Grandma in hospital when she was dying of cancer.

It was worse at the funeral. Mum tried to hug Grandad afterwards but he pushed her away. He said it was all her fault Grandma got ill. It was the shame of having her daughter living with a vicious criminal.

We haven't seen him since. It was a waste of time lumbering Kenny with such a duff name. It will be much worse when he's old enough to watch *South Park*.

Dad was OK for a bit after Kenny was born. We've got a photo taken on a day at the seaside and Dad's got baby Kenny on his shoulders, a little skinny knee either side of his cheeks. Kenny looks scared stiff but he's clinging grimly to Dad's long hair. Mum is laughing up at him, holding a beach ball. She's wearing a bikini top and a tiny skirt, showing off her pierced belly button. Her tummy is as flat as a pancake even after having Kenny and me.

I'm standing by her side. I'm wearing a bikini top and a tiny skirt too. This is a BIG mistake. My



tummy isn't like a pancake. I look as if I've *swallowed* a beach ball.

Dad loved having a son. As soon as Kenny could toddle he was kicking a ball to him and taking him down the pub. Kenny struggled so hard to kick the ball back he usually fell over, and he drank so many Cokes and lemonades down at the pub trying to drink pint for pint with Dad that he often wet himself on the way home.

Dad was surprisingly gentle with him. He didn't even get cross when Kenny cried. He refused to acknowledge that our Kenny was the wimpiest little kid on the whole estate.

'He's a holy terror, my lad Kenny,' Dad would boast, holding Kenny high above his head until he squealed. 'Growing up into a regular little bruiser, scrapping all over the place. He'll be banned from his nursery school if we don't watch out.'

Kenny did get into fights at nursery, but it was with the little girls. He wanted to squeeze into the playhouse with them. They weren't having any so they hit him with the plastic teapot and gave him a black eye.

Dad even boasted to the teachers when Kenny started in reception that they'd have their work cut out coping with *his* little lad.

I'm the one who had her work cut out coping with Kenny. I'd sneak over to the babies' playground to find Kenny trailing around by himself, head drooping. The other little kids would push him over just for the fun of it, leaving him snivelling, rubbing his eyes with his grazed hands, blood



trickling down into his socks. He'd scream if the teachers or dinner ladies went near him. I was the one who had to pick him up and mop him.

I do all the mopping up. I remember when Mum really was playing around with this guy she met up the park. He was running, training because he was in some reserve football team. He looked a *bit* like David Beckham.

I caught him with Mum when I came home early from school because I'd been sick. Mum made out he'd just popped in for a coffee, but they looked all hot and rumpled.

I was sick again because I was so scared. I didn't see how she could take such a crazy risk. I knew Dad was up north for a couple of weeks on some dodgy-sounding business trip but he had lots of mates spying for him and telling him if his missus was playing around.

'Are you *crazy*, Mum?' I said.

'I can't help it, Jayni. He made me feel like a girl again,' said Mum, her cheeks bright pink. 'It's not been right between me and your dad, not for a long time.'

'But Dad'll kill you if he finds out,' I said.

'He *won't* find out. Well. Not yet.'

'You can't tell him!'

My stomach churned. Mum could be so stupid. I knew that look in her eyes. She was telling herself a little fairy tale. The footballer would clasp her to his six-pack chest and tell her he'd been picked to play for Manchester United and would she be his bride in the million-pound mansion that he'd



just bought. Plus he'd take Kenny and me too. Mum drifted into Dreamworld and went shopping with Victoria Beckham every day while Kenny and I asked Brooklyn and Romeo round to play with all our new toys . . .

'Mum!' I wanted to shake her. I knew her footballer. He had a different girl every week. He'd never stick with Mum. And he wouldn't want Kenny and me tagging along. Anyway, even if it all came true, even the Man U part, Mum couldn't possibly live happily ever after. Dad would smash his way through the big picture window and tear the footballer's head off his shoulders and then he'd beat her until the fluffy white carpets turned red.

I hated saying this to Mum but I had to make her see sense. Then Dad heard some rumour anyway and came straight back home. You could tell by the way he banged the front door that this was it. Big trouble.

He didn't start straight away. He asked Mum questions, his voice very quiet, very soft. 'Come on, Nikki, don't look so scared. I just want you to tell me I've got it all wrong. If I have, then fine, I'll drop it straight away. I'm a reasonable guy, aren't I?' Then, suddenly yelling, '*Aren't I?*'

Mum panicked. She gabbled that he'd got it all wrong, she'd never so much as looked at another man, though of course she couldn't help being lonely while Dad was away, but even so she'd never dream of talking to any other guy, let alone ask them in for a coffee . . .' Any minute now she'd be letting it all out, telling him everything.



I wished I were as little as Kenny. He always hid under his bed, clamping his hands over his ears so he couldn't hear. I had to listen, even though I couldn't bear it.

Dad took much longer than usual. He said he was teaching her a lesson she'd never forget.

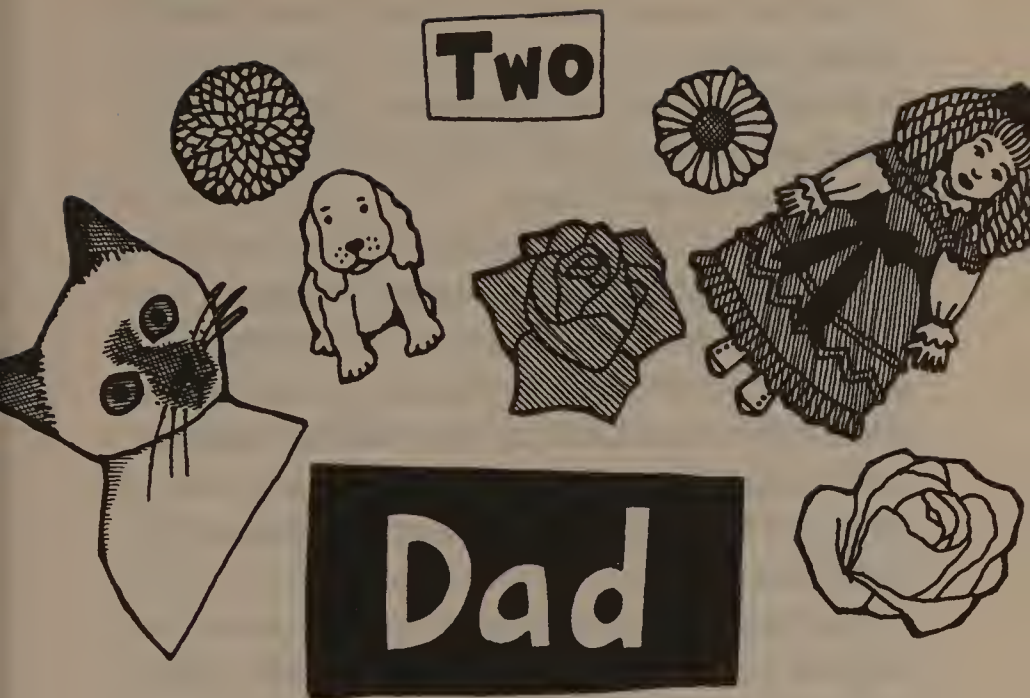
When he'd finished he stormed off out again. I ran to Mum. I wondered if I should call an ambulance. She couldn't speak because her mouth was all bloody and swollen but she shook her head when she saw me pick up the phone. She'd been up to the hospital several times in the past. She never told on Dad, she always said she'd tripped or walked into a lamppost, but Dad got even madder if he found out.

I mopped her up as best I could, holding a cold flannel to her poor face. I cried all over her. I felt so bad that I hadn't been able to protect her.

She couldn't go out for a week because of the bruises. Not just on her face. I saw her in the bath. Her breasts and stomach were black.

I looked at my mum then and knew I hated my dad.





'Don't tell Dad about the lottery money,' I begged Mum.

'Don't worry, I'm keeping quiet. Lips zipped, like I said.'

She asked for it in five-pound notes so it looked as impressive as possible.

'We're in the money!' she sang, tossing handfuls of fivers in the air. They fluttered like big blue butterflies, sticking in her hair, catching on her clothes, landing all over the carpet.

'Mum, stop it, you'll lose some!' I said, trying to gather them up.



'You win some, you lose some,' Mum laughed, tossing more.

Kenny laughed too, kicking his way through a pile of notes as if they were autumn leaves.

'Leave *off*, Kenny,' I said.

But I started to get carried away too, scooping the money up and then scattering it again. These crisp new notes didn't seem real. I thought of the picture of the denim jacket lined with soft pink fur I'd cut out and stuck in my scrapbook. I knew if I could only own such a garment I might have a chance of looking as little and cute and blonde as the girl model.

'What are you dreaming of buying, Jayni, eh?' said Mum, putting her arm round me. She rubbed her soft cheek against mine.

'Well, there's this jacket—' I started. Then I swallowed. 'No, it's your money, Mum. You already treated us in Sid's.'

'Don't be so daft. What's mine is yours. And yours too, Kenny. What do you want, my little pal?' Mum asked.

'A comic and a red ice lolly,' said Kenny.

We groaned at him.

'Something else, Kenny. Something big. Like a denim jacket with fur.'

'I'd like a jacket like Dad's. Leather!' said Kenny, his eyes shining. 'Then I'd look a big boy. Big and tough.'

'You, big and tough, matie?' I said, picking him up and blowing a raspberry on his tummy.



‘What about Dad?’ said Kenny, squealing. ‘What’s he getting?’

I looked at Mum. She sighed and started gathering up the money. I set Kenny down and started helping her.

‘We’re not telling Dad, Kenny,’ I said, smoothing the five-pound notes, assembling them into neat rectangles.

‘*Why?*’

I looked at Mum.

‘Why aren’t we telling him, Jayni?’ she said.

‘Because we know what he’s *like*. He could take it all for himself and waste it on some business deal that goes wrong. Or he could take it down the betting shop, or go away on a bender with his mates – and it’s your money, Mum.’

‘Yeah, but maybe it’s not fair, if we’re all having presents,’ said Mum. ‘Here, I could kid on I just won a bit, right, and then hide the rest.’

‘He’ll find out and then he’ll be furious. And then he’ll start.’

‘Yeah, OK,’ said Mum flatly. ‘Right. Well, we’ll be sensible. I’ll put the money in a building society and save it for a rainy day. And you won’t get your new jackets, kids, but we can’t make your dad suspicious – isn’t that right, Jayni?’

‘Yes,’ I said, putting the money in her bag.

I hated it that I had to be the one to be sensible. And I ached for that denim jacket.

‘Can’t I have my leather jacket like Dad’s?’ said Kenny.

‘No, love. Jayni says we can’t,’ said Mum.



It wasn't fair. I hate the way Mum twists things sometimes. She tries to turn *me* into the mum. Then she blames me for spoiling things.

I threw the rest of the money at her and went off to my bedroom to work on my scrapbook. I started cutting up my new magazines, though Kenny had been at my scissors and they were all gummed up with sellotape. I picked all the mucky little sticky bits off the blades, my teeth clenched. Then I carefully cut out a Victorian doll with a purple crinoline. I snipped my way round every little twist and turn of her full frock and steered very slowly around her tiny button boots and cut in and out of her fiddly little fingers. I pretended I was a Victorian girl in a big purple dress and this was my matching doll. I had a little brother who was very obedient and adored his elder sister. We didn't have a papa.

Then I cut out a tiny, toffee-brown cocker spaniel puppy with very floppy ears and a Siamese kitten with a delicate heart-shaped face and big blue eyes. These were our pets, Toffee and Bluebell. I cut some flowers from my birthday card box and a blue sky background and then I tried to draw a big Victorian house because I couldn't find a proper picture of one anywhere. I'm not very good at drawing so I just did a rough outline of a big house. I cut out girls' faces from *Girltalk* and stuck them looking out of all the windows, bordered by wax crayon purple velvet curtains. These were all my very best friends, Charlotte, Victoria, Emily, Evangeline and Jemima. It took me ages to think up special Victorian names.



I was so lost in my scrapbook world that I didn't hear the front door bang. I didn't know my dad was home until I heard him call, 'Where's my princess then?'

I shut my scrapbook up quick and shot into the living room. It's never a good idea to keep my dad waiting. But he'd called me princess, which was a promising sign. He might be in a good mood.

He smiled as I rushed into the room. 'There's my girl!' he said, beckoning me over to his armchair. Kenny was already on his knee. Mum was snapping open a can of beer and pouring it for him.

'Great, isn't it, Dad's home early,' she said.

I breathed in. 'Hi, Daddy,' I said in this false small-girly voice.

'Hi, Princess,' Dad said, and he patted the arm of his chair.

I perched there obediently. I stretched a smile across my face while my eyes swivelled all round the room, looking for a forgotten fiver on the rug, under the coffee table, tucked in the telly mags. I couldn't see any but I still couldn't breathe out comfortably. Dad was in a good mood, but he could turn in seconds. You never knew what might set him off. Some silly little thing you said – sometimes just a look, sometimes it seemed like no reason at all. It was as if Dad's head was wired up weirdly and every so often he was programmed to explode.

But today he seemed mellow, even though he said he'd had a row at work so he'd walked out. 'And about time too. Who wants their poxy job?' he said.



Three months ago, when he'd started working there, he'd had us all reciting that it was the best job ever, his Fresh Start.

He was making another Fresh Start now. He'd met an old mate down the pub at lunch time who was setting up his own minicab firm. He wanted Dad to join his team of drivers.

'Will he provide the car, like?' Mum asked.

'No, I've got to get the wheels, babe.'

Mum always softened when Dad called her babe. She forgot that he could also call her a dozy cow or worse.

'Still, that shouldn't present too many problems. There's a mate of mine wants rid of a very nice little Escort, two years old, not much mileage to speak of. He'll let me have it dirt cheap too. I've just got to raise a few thousand. I'll get a loan off someone, just you wait and see, babe. My luck's changed. I can feel it.' He reached out and patted Mum on her bum.

'Jay!' She laughed at him – and I felt my stomach screw up in a knot. She was looking at him like he'd suddenly turned into a handsome prince. 'It is our lucky day,' she said.

She was going to blow it. She was going to tell him.

*Don't!* I mouthed at her. She just blinked at me, pretending she hadn't seen.

'You'll never ever guess what, Jay,' she said. She went to her handbag and fanned out a great handful of fivers. 'Here's your car money, darling. I won it on a scratch card! There'll be enough for treats



for all of us. Our Kenny wants a little leather jacket just like his dad. Jayni wants one of them denim jackets lined with fur – *pink* fur, isn't that right, pet?'

I had to smile and say yes and act all excited.

I was scared it was going to go horribly wrong. Dad paused, staring at the money in Mum's hand-bag. You could see his brain going tick, tick, tick. But then he threw Kenny right up in the air and caught him and whirled him round. He pulled me up too and we danced round and round and then he danced with Mum, giving her a great big movie-star kiss, telling her she was his Lady Luck.

We went out for our tea to T.G.I. Friday's to celebrate. Mum and Dad had fancy cocktails and then we ordered this h-u-g-e meal. I started to wonder if it was going to be all right after all. Dad was larking about and cracking jokes and flirting with the waitress. I wanted to believe in fairy tales and have fun too. I ate all my giant burger and chips and then an entire Death by Chocolate.

These women on an office outing came over to Dad, as giggly as girls, and asked if he was Jay Fenton who used to sing with the Mad Beggars. When Dad said he was they all squealed. The prettiest one with the lowest-cut top stuck her head up close and asked if he'd give them a little song now. They were having a great night out but this would be the icing on the cake.

'I'll be the cherry on top of the icing, darling,' said Dad, and he went over to their table and sang to them all.



Mum drained her glass of wine and then ordered another bottle. 'What?' she snapped when she saw me looking at her. 'Those women are buying your dad drinks, look.'

I didn't want to look. I hated it when Mum and Dad drank lots because it always ended up in a fight. I buried my head in the menu instead, though I was so full up I had to undo the top button of my jeans. I read each meal description very carefully. I wished I could cut out some of the pictures for my scrapbook.

I used to play this game with Kenny – I'd find a picture in a magazine of a big chocolate cake with layers of thick cream and I'd reach out my finger and touch the paper cake and pretend to lick the cream off my finger, going, 'Yum yum yum'. Sometimes it seemed like I could taste the cake, feel the smooth cream and the sponge crumbs on my tongue.

Kenny would beg me for a piece of cake. I'd hold the page out to him. He'd stab his fingers all over the slippery paper, trying to reach through into the soft cake. He'd suck hard at his fingers but he could never imagine it for himself. 'I want the cake!' he'd wail.

'God, you're not still hungry?' Mum said, pouring the new bottle of wine.

'God, you're not still *thirsty*?' I said.

'Don't you go all snippy with me, miss,' said Mum, giving me a kick under the table. She was wearing her best black high heels with very pointy toes.

'That *hurt*, Mum!'



'Rubbish,' said Mum, but she reached under the table and rubbed my shin. 'There, that better?' She was leaning so far forward she overbalanced and ended up *under* the table.

'Whoops!' She tried to get up and banged her head. She started half laughing, half crying.

'Mum!' I hissed, trying to hook her out.

'Mum!' said Kenny, giggling, thinking it was a big joke. He slid off his chair and squatted beside her, going, 'Shh!' as if it were a game of hide and seek.

'Oh please, get *up*, Kenny. Mum, Dad will see. Quick!'

She couldn't be quick to save her life. She just crouched there, clutching Kenny, tickling him now. Dad was looking our way. I gave him a sickly grin, waving like everything was all right. Dad stopped singing and came over to us.

'What the hell . . .?'

'Kenny fell under the table. Mum's just trying to pick him up,' I gabbled.

'Dad! Dad, we're hiding!' Kenny squealed.

'Well, now I've found you, and you're coming up out of there, my lad,' said Dad. He seized him under the arms and pulled. Kenny came up laughing and kicking.

'Mind your drink, Kenny!' I said, grabbing it just in time.

'What about *my* drink?' Mum said, trying to crawl out on her hands and knees.

'What are you playing at, Nikki? Are you drunk?' said Dad.



'No – but what a good idea! Let's all get drunk to celebrate. I'm Lady Luck, that's what I am,' Mum said, hauling herself up. Her hair was all tousled and her mascara was smudged.

'You look a right mess,' said Dad. 'Come on, let's go home. Jump to it.'

We jumped. I was scared all the way home, wondering what was coming. There was this awful Voice of Doom in my head. *He's going to beat her up.*

Maybe Mum could hear the voice too. She started singing to shut it up, all her favourite old pop songs. Then Kenny started whimpering and Mum picked him up, balancing him on her hip, singing 'Mr Sandman'. She used to sing it to me when I was little, very softly, very slowly, and whenever she came to the 'lend me your ear' bit she'd nuzzle it, pretending she was going to nibble it right off. It always soothed me and made me go to sleep. But Mum's voice was too high and wobbly now. Dad didn't join in the singing. He didn't say a word all the way home.

The first thing he did when he got in was pour himself a large glass of whisky. He drank it back like tap water.

'Right! Here we are. Our happy little family. Lucky us, won the lottery. Only it just suddenly occurs to me, Nikki, you've been acting a bit odd about all this. Why didn't you tell me right away, eh? Why didn't you yell it out the minute I got in? Were you going to keep it a secret? Were you going to keep quiet about the cash, keep it all for yourself,



eh? Or maybe you were going to spend it on lover boy? Your little footballing chum. Still in touch, are we?’

‘Of course not, Jay. You’re the only guy for me, you know that,’ Mum said. She was still clutching Kenny. ‘Look, let me tuck Kenny up, OK? And you get to bed too, Jayni.’

‘Oh yes, to give you time to make up a few excuses,’ said Dad. ‘I wouldn’t bother, Nikki. I’ll get the truth out of you one way or another.’

Mum carried Kenny out of the room. She called to me to come too.

‘Are you deaf, Jayni?’ said Dad. ‘Get to bed.’

I wanted to go to bed and pull the covers right up over my head. But I didn’t go. ‘I’m staying up, Dad,’ I said.

‘You what?’ said Dad. Nobody ever spoke back to him. Especially not me.

‘You heard me, Dad,’ I said. My mouth was so dry the words were whispers. My chocolate pudding stirred round and round in my stomach.

‘Get to bed this instant, you cheeky little cow,’ said Dad. He got out of his chair and raised his hand.

I wanted to be brave but I couldn’t help squealing then. I didn’t make much noise but Mum came running. She saw us, Dad’s hand in the air, me ducking, like we were both stuck playing a grim game of statues.

‘Get to *bed*, Jayni!’ Mum said.

‘I’m staying here,’ I cried.

‘What’s got into you?’ Dad said.



'It's you! You spoil everything! Even a lovely thing like Mum winning the lottery. It's all spoilt because of you and your moods and your shouting and your hitting. I *knew* you'd be like this. Why can't you be like a real dad?' I yelled.

Dad's head jerked as if *I'd* hit *him*. He stood still, shaking his head, as if he couldn't quite work it out. I think that's why he hit me. He didn't know what else to do.

It was a slap across my face that lifted me right off my feet. I ended up flat on my back on the carpet. Mum leapt at Dad, scratching his face with her long nails. He punched her and then when she was on the ground beside me he kicked her. Then he spat at both of us and walked out. The door slammed behind him.

'Oh, Jayni, let's look at you,' said Mum, kneeling beside me.

'I'm . . . OK. He hit you more, much more.'

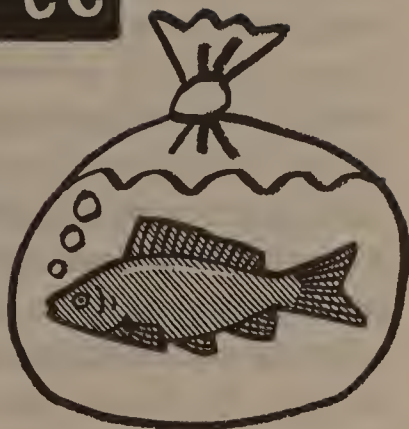
'Can you get up, darling? We've got to be quick,' Mum said, pulling at me. Her nose was bleeding and she wiped it impatiently with the back of her hand. 'Come on, sweetheart! I need you to help me pack.'

'What?' I stared at Mum. I didn't know what she was talking about.

She cupped my burning face with her hands. 'We're not staying. Now he's started on you he won't stop. I'm not having that. We're running away!'



# Three



## Running Away

I stared at Mum.

*'How can we run away?'*

'Easy. I've still got the ten thousand pounds in my handbag. Well, we're about fifty quid down because of the meal, but never mind. Thank God I didn't give it to him for that stupid car. OK, OK, *I'm* the big stupid. He said he'd knock some sense into me – and he has, he has. I'm not having him using you as a punchbag, kiddo. Come *on*, then. You are up for it, aren't you?'

'Yes! Yes, of course I am. But he'll go berserk when he finds us.'



'He won't. We'll get right away, you and me and Kenny. A completely fresh start. So come on. Pack a bag, just a little one you can carry. And do one for Kenny too while I go through all my stuff.'

'Mum . . . this isn't a game, is it?'

'Do I look like I'm playing a blooming game?' said Mum, wiping her nose again. 'He'll be down the pub till closing time but we want to be well away then. So come on, Jayni, jump to it.'

So I jumped. I ran into our bedroom and snapped on the light. I looked weird in the mirror, one side of my face bright red where Dad had hit me, one side chalk-white. Kenny blinked in the sudden bright light and tried to pull the duvet over his head.

'No, Kenny, we're getting up. Come on, you've got to get dressed.'

'But it's night time.'

'Yes, but we're going out again.'

'With Dad?'

'No, just you and me and Mum.' I hauled him out of bed and hugged his little squirmy body hard. 'And you're going to be a big big boy and help.'

Kenny reached out and touched my red cheek.

'Ouch!'

'Will it get right again?' said Kenny.

'Of course it will. Now!' I stood him on the floor and looked at him. He was still wearing his T-shirt and pants and socks. I had a brainwave. I rummaged in his drawer. 'Put these on then, OK?' I said, thrusting more pants and socks at him. 'Over the other ones. And another T-shirt. And



then there's your red jumper, you like that, and the blue Thomas the Tank Engine one, and your jeans . . . We'll have to pack a spare pair, we'll never get another lot on over the top.'

Kenny started giggling hysterically as I shoved as many clothes on him as I could. He waddled about so comically I couldn't help laughing too, though my heart was going thump thump because I was so scared Dad might come back and catch us.

'What are you kids *laughing* at? Come *on*,' Mum called urgently.

I set Kenny to packing his favourite toys in his school bag and started on my own clothes. It was easier for me. All my stuff was getting too small and tight and made me look far too fat. I hated nearly everything. I was already wearing my favourite outfit, my purple velvet skirt and my black grown-up top. I shoved a big black cardie on over the top and then my horrible padded white jacket, which made me look like a snowman – but never mind, I could get the denim jacket now we had lots of money.

I packed my underwear and my jeans and my pink top with the hearts and my suede boots which rubbed a lot but I still loved them. Then I remembered my pyjamas, and my old bear Pinkie was tangled up inside them. All her fur's worn smooth and shiny and she's lost an eye which gives her a lopsided expression. She's really tatty now and I'm too old for teddies anyway but I still crammed her into my bag.

Kenny was making even sillier choices, shoving



a yoyo without any string and broken crayons and a jigsaw set with half the pieces missing into his school bag, but forgetting his new wax crayons and little Bob, the blue bear he's had since he was born. I repacked for him, and then jiggled my own stuff around, packing a big carrier bag with my scrapbook and my new magazines and scissors and sellotape and Pritt.

'We're done, Mum,' I said, going into her bedroom.

She looked as if she was in fast forward, rushing round like crazy, ransacking her wardrobe and her chest of drawers. Her nose still wouldn't stop bleeding. It made a garish trail past her lips, down her chin, dripping onto her blue top.

'Your best blue top, Mum!'

'It'll wash out. I'll leave it on. Though it looks a mess. Should I just dump it?' Mum stood still, suddenly freeze-framed.

'Put a sweater over it. I've got Kenny wearing half his clothes,' I said.

'You're a clever kid,' said Mum.

She didn't think me so clever when she saw my carrier bag. 'You can't drag that along too, Jayni!'

It was one of those big strong fifteen-pence supermarket carriers but my scrapbook only just fitted inside. It's a huge, old-fashioned accounts book with hundreds of pages. I bought it for a pound two years ago at a car boot fair. It is my most valued possession. Mum knew this, but she still argued.

'You can't take that great big thing, not when



you've got your own bag, and you'll probably have to carry Kenny's too.'

'I'll carry it all, I promise. I *have* to have my scrapbook.'

'You could start a new one.'

'I need this one. It's got all my best ever pictures. I *have* to take it, Mum.'

'Oh, for God's sake, do as you're *told*!' Mum shouted. Then she stopped, her hand over her mouth.

We heard footsteps walking along the balcony towards our flat.

'He's back!' Mum hissed, and we clutched each other.

But the footsteps went past our front door and on down the balcony. Mum breathed out and tapped her hand over her heart. Then she gave me a quick pat on the shoulders. 'OK, OK, take the bloody scrapbook. Let's just get *out* of here, quick.'

She got her suitcase and her handbag, still wadded tight with five-pound notes. We hung Kenny's heavy satchel over his small shoulders. I grabbed my own school bag and the scrapbook carrier. We looked round the flat one quick last time.

Kenny suddenly wailed that he wanted to take Bubble, our goldfish. I promised him he could have a whole tank of tropical fish in our new place but Kenny wouldn't be diverted. He started howling, his arms round Bubble's bowl.

'Oh God, what next?' said Mum. She poured some water into a polythene bag and tipped Bubble



into it. 'OK, he's coming too,' she said. 'Now, let's go.'

So we went, staggering along the balcony and down in the lift. I was terrified we'd walk out and bump straight into Dad but there was no sign of him, or any of his mates.

'They'll still be in the pub, with any luck,' said Mum. 'Still, the sooner we scarper the better.'

A taxi drew up down the road and three old ladies got out, back from their bingo.

'Hey! Hey, taxi!' Mum yelled.

She nodded at me proudly, as if she'd summoned it up herself out of thin air. The taxi driver shook his head at us as we hobbled towards him. He shook his head again when he saw Mum's bloody nose.

'Do you want the hospital, love?'

'No, the railway station, please,' Mum said briskly. She wiped her nose. 'Walked straight into a lamppost, didn't I?'

The taxi driver raised his eyebrows but didn't comment. My cheek had calmed down now, though it still hurt. My teeth felt funny too. I hoped they weren't going to fall out. Still, it might make my cheeks look hollow. I hated my fat face.

The taxi driver was peering at Kenny and his bag. 'What you got there, son? Is it a baby shark?'

'No, it's a goldfish,' said Kenny.

'It's never!' said the taxi driver. 'Well, I'm not supposed to carry no livestock. That's what a goldfish is, livestock. So he'll have to swim his own way through the puddles to the railway station, right?'



Kenny's face crumpled.

'He's joking, Kenny,' I said, pushing him into the taxi.

'I didn't mean to set him off. It's just my funny way,' said the taxi driver.

'That's OK, mate,' said Mum, getting in after us. 'But can you kind of step on it?'

'Sure. What time's your train, then?' he said.

Mum hesitated. 'Not quite sure. But we're running late, I know that.'

We set off, round the estate, down the road, right past The Albert, Dad's pub. Mum and I looked at each other. Mum slid down in her seat. I did too, pushing Kenny's head down.

'You're hurting me, Jayni,' he complained.

'Well, scrunch down, Kenny. Go on, right down,' I urged.

'*Why?*'

The taxi driver was staring at us in the mirror, sucking his teeth, sussing out the situation. We sat up properly when we were past the pub. Mum peered in her powder compact, wiping her nose and rubbing all the smudged mascara off her eyes.

'Look, love, I know it's none of my business . . . ' the taxi driver started.

'Yeah, that's right,' said Mum, powdering her swelling face.

'It's obvious your old man's given you a right going over. Why not go to the police?'

'Them!' Mum said a very rude word. 'They're useless when there's a domestic. Oh yeah, they might arrest him, but they're not going to keep



him banged up down the station, are they? And he's not going to be in a very nice mood when he gets back home, is he?

'Yeah, well, I suppose you've got a point. So, you're doing a runner, are you, you and the kids?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Mum. She started biting the skin around her thumb. 'Not in front of the kids, eh?'

I knew this was just a ploy to get him to shut up, but I resented it all the same. I wasn't a *kid*, not like Kenny. I knew what was going on all right. I knew as much as Mum anyway.

We got to the station and Mum paid the driver. She struggled to hide the contents of her handbag but he spotted some of the fivers. He raised his eyebrows.

'Strewth, have you just robbed a bank, girl?'

'Wouldn't you like to know,' said Mum, standing on the pavement while I hauled Kenny out and then all our bags.

'Thelma and Louise all rolled into one, that's me.' She put two fingers together and cocked her thumb. 'Bang!' she said, aiming at the taxi driver's head.

He laughed and ducked. 'I'm not arguing with you, then. Still, best of luck.'

Mum gave him extra as a tip. 'You won't say where you dropped us off if anyone asks?' she said, serious now.

The driver ran his finger over his lips to show they were sealed. Mum stared after him as he drove off.



‘Nice guy, that,’ she muttered wistfully.

I could see the story going on in her head. The taxi driver would suddenly turn back, tell us to hop in and take us wherever we wanted – London, New York, Disneyland. He’d look after us and earn money for us and never ever hit us.

That was the story version. In real life he drove off to join the other taxis at the rank and didn’t even give us a wave.

‘Come on, then,’ said Mum, sniffing.

She was still wearing her best high heels, twisting her ankles because her heavy suitcase made her walk lopsided. Kenny and I staggered after her.

The station was almost empty. My heart started thumping again. What if there weren’t any more trains? The station would be one of the first places Dad would come looking for us.

Mum was standing at the information board, running her finger down the train timetable, looking worried. Then she stabbed a line with her finger, suddenly smiling. ‘It’s OK! It’s leaving in ten minutes.’

‘Where are we going, Mum?’

‘London!’

I swallowed. ‘Yeah, but where in London? We don’t know anyone there.’

‘That’s right. That’s good! Fresh start and all that. Let’s get straight on the train. We can always pay if the ticket man comes round. That way there’s no record of any transaction at the main ticket office.’ Mum giggled. ‘I feel like I’m in some cops and robbers film. It’s kind of fun, isn’t it?’



She didn't look like it was fun. Her face looked worse in the bright light of the station. Her giggling sounded weird, too much like crying. But she wanted us to agree with her so I nodded determinedly.

'Yes, it's like an adventure, Mum. Isn't it, Kenny?'

Kenny was almost out of it, practically sleep-walking, though he managed to concentrate enough to clutch Bubble's bag. As soon as I'd lifted him onto the train his head lolled and he fell fast asleep. I had a peep at Bubble. He didn't look too happy but there was nothing I could do about it.

'We can get Bubble a proper fish tank, can't we, Mum?'

'Yeah, sure. And we'll get lots more goldfish. And what do you call those massive ones that cost a fortune?'

'Koi carp. But they'll be much too big, won't they?'

'So? We'll have a gigantic aquarium. With dolphins!'

'No, *sharks*,' I said, baring my teeth.

It was mad. We were discussing a proper home for Bubble when we still had no idea where we were going to live ourselves.

'Mum? When we get to London where exactly are we going to go?'

'We'll stay in a hotel just until we get ourselves sorted.'

'Yes, but it'll be very late when we get there. What if all the hotels are closed for the night? What if we can't find anywhere? What if—?'



'Oh give it a rest, Jayni, you're doing my head in.'

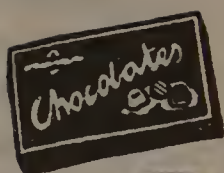
'But—'

'Shut up, will you?'

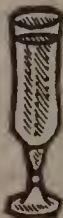
I curled up against Kenny and tried to go to sleep. I couldn't manage it. Everything kept going round and round in my head. Every time I looked over at Mum I could see they were going round and round in her head too. She was gnawing her thumb. It looked like she wouldn't have any skin left by the time we got to London.



# Four



## New Names



It was easy after all. When we got to the station the Upper Crust food stall was still open. Mum bought us all a sandwich and asked the woman serving us if she knew if there were any hotels nearby. She drew us a little map on a paper napkin. It turned out there was a whole street of hotels only five minutes away.

'Though they look a bit seedy,' said Mum, when we got there. 'We're in the money now. We could stay at the blooming Ritz if we wanted.'

But Kenny was so out of it Mum had to carry him on her hip, lugging her case as best she



could. It was obvious we couldn't go any further.

The first hotel said they were full. No one came to the door of the second hotel, though the hall light was on and we rang and rang. I started to panic then, thinking we were going to stagger round half the hotels in London.

Mum said brightly, 'Third time lucky' – and it was. A man came to the door and said he had a double room for the night, £45 to be paid now, and a fiver each if we wanted a continental breakfast.

Mum handed over the money and then signed the register. She's got very big, sprawly writing. She swirls every loop and puts little hearts instead of dots over her 'i's. But she made her writing little and squiggly in his greasy register, so that it was very hard to read. It didn't look anything like Mum's name, Nikki Fenton.

Still, the hotel man didn't seem bothered. He didn't even give Mum's sore face a second glance. Her nose was all crusty now. She dabbed at it self-consciously and started some spiel about falling flat on her face because of her silly high heels, but the man didn't seem to be listening. It was like he'd heard it all before a hundred times over. He just handed Mum the keys, pointed up the stairs and went back to watching Channel Five in his office.

'Charming,' Mum muttered. 'Well, we won't be stopping *here* for long.'

We hauled Kenny and our bags up three narrow flights of stairs and found our room down a dingy corridor. It had hardly any furniture, just a double bed with cigarette burns on the duvet, a wardrobe



with only one hanger and a wash basin with a sliver of soap and just one towel. Mum sniffed contemptuously. She gingerly pulled back the duvet but the sheets were reassuringly white and smelt freshly laundered.

‘Come on, then, let’s get into bed,’ she said. ‘You get Kenny out of all them clothes while I go and find the toilet.’

Mum came back with her nose wrinkled. ‘It’s not very nice,’ she said. ‘Watch Kenny when you take him, Jayni. Don’t let him touch anything.’

Kenny was half asleep so he did as he was told, dopyly. I found it hard to go myself, not daring to sit on the filthy seat. I just sort of hung in mid-air, hoping for the best. I distracted myself reading all the rude messages scribbled on the wall.

When we got back Mum was already in bed, her mohair cardie on over her black nightie. ‘Come on kids, it’s freezing in here.’

We jumped in with her. It was like sliding into snow, but Mum put her arms tight round us and we all huddled up. It gradually got cosier. We heard some couple arguing along the corridor but Mum pulled the covers right up over our heads so we were in our own cave where no one could get us.

I fell asleep eventually but woke with a start in the middle of the night. I’d been dreaming of Dad. He was chasing after me. I woke up with my heart pounding as if I’d really been running. I reached out for Mum but she wasn’t there. I could only feel Kenny, huddled into a little ball, breathing heavily.

I sat up, panicking. It was dark in the poky little



bedroom but I could just make out a shape over by the window.

‘Mum?’ I slipped out of bed and pattered across the worn carpet. ‘What you doing, Mum?’ I put my hand on her arm. She was shivering in spite of her mohair cardigan.

‘Shh, love. Don’t wake Kenny.’

‘It’s OK, he’s dead to the world. Mum? Can’t you sleep?’

‘Nope. And I’ve run out of fags, which is a bit of a bummer. I was wondering about going out looking for a machine somewhere—’

‘Don’t, Mum!’

‘OK. I wasn’t very thrilled about the idea myself. Oh Jayni, what the hell are we *doing* here? Maybe I went a little bit nuts. Your dad wouldn’t *really* start on you. He thinks the world of you, darling.’

‘He thinks the world of you too, Mum, but he hits you. *Why* does he?’

‘Search me. I just seem to set him off. I’m pretty useless really. Not much cop as a wife – or a mum.’ She started to cry.

‘You’re a *lovely* mum,’ I said. I put my arms round her. ‘You’re not useless at all. You’re *lucky*. You’re the only person who’s ever won the lottery round our way.’

‘Lady Luck,’ Mum sniffed. ‘That’s what I signed in the register downstairs. L. Luck. Just in case your dad came snooping. Maybe it’s not such a good idea to be so close to the station. This could be the first place he’ll look if he comes after us. We’ll leave right after breakfast, OK?’



'Is that going to be your new name then, Mum? Lady Luck?'

'Well, "Lady" sounds a bit daft, doesn't it? I could be Nikki Luck now, though. Or maybe I'll change my first name too. I'll be . . . Victoria. I always liked Posh best of all the Spice Girls. Victoria Luck. Yeah, sounds great, doesn't it?'

'Shall we change our names too, Kenny and me?'

'Yes, I think you'd better. Who do you want to be then, darling?'

I thought of all the women in my scrapbook, Britney and Charlotte and Kate and Kylie, but that didn't work because I wasn't remotely like any of them. I'd edged each picture with lots of cut-out presents for each woman – flowers and glasses of champagne and boxes of chocolates and bottles of perfume. One of the pictures had the model's name, Lola Rose.

I tried the name out inside my head. I liked it.

'I'll be Lola Rose.' I stood up straight, tossed my hair, smoothed my nightie. Lola Rose sounded a seriously cool girl. She had long, thick, curly hair (my fine, straight hair seemed thicker and curlier already). Lola Rose had a perfect model figure. I sucked in my tummy and stuck out my chest. Lola Rose wasn't scared of anyone. Not even her dad.

I breathed out slowly, a little smile on my face.

'Lola Rose Luck,' said Mum. 'OK. New name, new start.' She rubbed her watery eyes, smearing her mascara. 'Oh Gawd, look at me. Bum, I didn't pack my cleansing cream – or my make-up!'



'We can go shopping, get you heaps more. And I could have some too,' I said hopefully.

'OK, Lola Rose,' said Mum, going to the sink to wash her face. She scooped up some water – and then shrieked. 'My God!'

I'd filled the basin with cold water for Bubble. Mum had fished him out by mistake. He wriggled free and plopped back into the water while Mum and I giggled hysterically.

'Shut *up* in there, I'm trying to sleep,' someone called, banging on our wall.

Mum and I spluttered some more, hands over our mouths. Kenny woke up too.

'Where am I?' he said, starting to cry. '*Mum? Jayni?*'

'Shh, Kenny, we're here,' I said, going to him.

'And you can shut that kid up too!' the voice shouted from the other side of the wall.

'You're the one making all the noise, matie,' Mum yelled. '*You* shut up.'

'Mum! Don't! Please don't start a row,' I hissed. I had my arms round Kenny, trying to stop him wailing.

The voice yelled back something very rude, *so* rude that Mum and I got the giggles again. Mum got back into bed beside us.

'We're out of here first thing, kids,' she whispered. 'We're dossing down amongst some right nutters.'

'You're squashing me, Jayni!' Kenny complained.

'Sorry, sorry. But don't call me Jayni. I'm Lola Rose now.'



‘And I’m Victoria,’ said Mum.

‘Is this a game?’ Kenny said uncertainly. ‘I don’t like it. I want to go *home*.’

‘No you don’t,’ I said quickly. ‘This is much more fun. We’re going shopping later on. We’ll buy you all sorts, Kenny. But we’re being new people now, so we’ve got new names. I’m Lola Rose Luck. Cool name, isn’t it! And Mum’s Victoria Luck. So what name are you going to choose?’

‘I’m Kenny,’ said Kenny.

‘Yeah, but now you can be anybody. Shall I help you? What about . . . Jamie? Robbie? David?’

‘Which? I won’t remember,’ Kenny said, looking worried.

‘Yes, you will. How about something like your own name, so it doesn’t sound too different. Lenny? Benny?’

‘Could I be Kendall?’ said Kenny.

‘Kendal mint cake!’ Mum spluttered.

I felt Kenny stiffen, humiliated.

‘I think Kendall’s a cool name,’ I said.

‘Yeah, right, it’s totally cool. Victoria Luck has two cool kids, Kendall and Lola Rose,’ said Mum, snuggling down between us. ‘Shall we all try and have a little kip now?’

She cuddled us close. Kenny – *Kendall* – was quiet. I thought he’d gone to sleep. But then he piped up again. ‘What’s Dad going to be called?’

I waited for Mum to answer. She didn’t. Maybe *she* was asleep.

‘Dad isn’t part of our family now, Kendall,’ I whispered.



‘Why not?’ Kendall sounded astonished.

I couldn’t see how he could be so thick. ‘You *know* why!’ I hissed. ‘Because Dad’s horrible and keeps hitting Mum. He hit me too. It still hurts whenever I move my jaw.’

‘He doesn’t hit me,’ said Kendall.

‘Don’t you feel sorry he hits Mum?’

‘But she deserves it,’ said Kendall.

I took hold of his bony little shoulders through his T-shirt and shook him hard. ‘How *dare* you say such a wicked, stupid thing!’

‘But she *does* deserve it. Dad says so,’ Kendall said, starting to whimper. ‘Don’t, Jayni, you’re hurting.’

‘I’m not Jayni any more, I’m Lola, Lola Rose. And you’re not to say another word about Dad or I’ll get really cross. We hate Dad.’

‘No, we don’t,’ Kendall mumbled. ‘We love him.’

I turned my back on him. I elbowed him away when he tried to cuddle up. I hated *him* – even though he was right.

I hated Dad. He scared me silly. But I still loved him.

I thought of him wandering round our flat all by himself, calling our names, looking in every room, pulling down bedcovers, peering in wardrobes. He’d get mad later. Fighting mad. But he’d be so hurt too. He’d cry. Our dad was the toughest man on the estate but I’d often seen him cry. He always cried after he’d hit Mum. He’d hold her hands and tell her he was sorry, tears trickling down his cheeks. He’d kiss all her bruises. He’d go down on



his knees and beg her to forgive him. And she did.

It wasn't just Mum. Dad has a way of getting round anyone. When Kenny had a temper tantrum, flat on his back, drumming his heels and yelling fit to burst, Dad would pick him up, laughing. 'Let's switch off this silly noise,' he'd say, pressing Kenny's nose like a button. Kenny would stop mid-scream and laugh like it had been a joke all along.

Dad could get round me too. He'd come and sit beside me and pick up my hand and play with my fingers, calling them funny names. Once he painted each of my little bitten nails the seven colours of the rainbow and my thumbs and one pinky finger gold, silver and sparkly white. He bought me this little pack of rainbow beads and threaded them onto my plaits while he fed me rainbow-dotted chocolate buttons.

On my last birthday he gave me a great silver box tied with rainbow ribbon. There were layers of tissue inside so I knew it was a dress. I guessed it would be a rainbow dress and I felt anxious because I'm too big for that kind of party frock. It was beautiful, with smocking on the front and rainbow stripes, little puff sleeves and a big flouncy skirt. It was the sort of dress I'd have died for when I was about five. It looked *awful* on me now. It was much too tight, too bright, too babyish. But I had to smile and hold out my skirts and prance around as if I was thrilled to bits.

I had to wear it to the school disco. All the other kids laughed at me. No one wanted to dance with me so I danced by myself, leaping around wildly,



pretending to be having fun. I leapt a little too wildly and split my seams. Mum tried to sew them up for me but the material was ripped and frayed. We hid the dress at the back of the wardrobe so Dad wouldn't see.

I thought about him finding it now.

I felt as if I were splitting apart just like my dress.



Five



# ★ Seeing the Sights ★

We checked out of that hotel straight after our continental breakfast.

‘Though what’s continental about cornflakes and toast and watered-down orange juice?’ said Mum. ‘What a rip-off! Let’s splash out and stay somewhere decent.’

We chose a big new hotel overlooking the river Thames.

‘Dead classy,’ said Mum. ‘Don’t you let me down, kids.’

We were given a big bedroom with a huge bed with a pink silky cover that matched the ruffled



curtains. 'And Pinkie matches too,' I said, but when I tucked her under the covers she looked horribly grey and grubby. We had our own bathroom and a television and a phone and a fridge.

'Look, we can have lots of drinks! And there's peanuts and chocolates. Wow!' said Kendall, rifling through them.

'Hang on, I don't think they're free, are they, Mum?' I said, grabbing his wrists.

'Yeah, but we're in the money, babe. Let him help himself.'

Kendall drank a can of Coke and nibbled peanuts while Mum and I had a bath together. There were dinky little bottles of shampoo and bath foam so we had the bath brimming with bubbles. We felt just like film stars.

'You come and jump in too, Kenny – *Kendall*,' Mum called.

We could hear him mumbling away to himself – or to someone else.

'Kendall?' I clambered out of the bath, wrapped one of the wonderful big fluffy towels right round me and padded into the bedroom. Kendall was leaning against the dressing table, chatting into the phone.

'Yes, Dad, it's great in London,' he said.

I froze. 'Kenny!'

He looked startled, then turned his back on me. 'Only Jayni keeps nagging at me, Dad. And I have to sleep in a big bed with her and Mum and I want my *own* bed because I'm a big boy, aren't I?' he gabbled.



Then I grabbed the phone, wrenching it out of his hand so fiercely I bent his fingers back.

‘Ow!’ Kenny screamed. He tried to hit me with his hand and hurt his fingers more.

‘You told Dad where we are!’ I said.

Then I heard the dialling tone on the phone. Kenny hadn’t really been talking to Dad. He’d just been pretending.

Unless Dad had put the phone down his end . . .

‘Were you *really* talking to Dad, Kenny?’

‘Yes! And he said you’re very mean to me and he’s going to come and get you, see!’ Kenny shrieked. ‘And anyway, I’m not Kenny any more. I’m Kendall.’

‘For God’s sake!’ Mum called from the bathroom. ‘Stop yelling, both of you. They’ll be banging on the walls here.’

‘But he was trying to phone Dad!’

‘Don’t be so daft. He doesn’t know how to. He doesn’t even know the number properly.’

‘I do, I do! I know our number. It’s one two three four sixteen ten twenty, *see!*’ said Kenny.

I did see. I picked him up and gave him a hug, saying I was really sorry I’d hurt his poor hand. Mum got out of her bath, all pink and pretty in spite of the new bruises and her sore nose. I dunked Kendall in the water and blew bubbles with him until he’d cheered up.

‘Now let’s go out on the razzle,’ said Mum.

We started off with a second breakfast – pancakes and maple syrup and ice cream. I ate all mine and half of Kendall’s, and then ran my fingers round



and round the plate to get every scrap of maple syrup.

‘Tut tut, your manners, Lola Rose,’ said Mum. Then she stuck out her finger and did exactly the same.

I picked my plate up to lick it.

‘Uh-uh! You’re going a bit too far now,’ said Mum. ‘Come on then. Big treat time. We’re going on the London Eye.’

‘Big treat, big treat, big treat!’ Kendall sang over and over again, until it became meaningless gabble.

He whooped with excitement when we pointed out the huge wheel with its glass pods. We watched it revolving very very slowly.

‘Big treat, big treat, big treat,’ Kendall gabbled all the time we queued. Everyone smiled at first and said, ‘Bless him,’ but eventually you could see it was getting on their nerves. It was getting on *our* nerves too, but there’s no way you can shut him up when he starts. He ‘big treated’ right until the moment we went to step into the glass pod. Then he screamed.

‘Kenny? What’s up?’ said Mum.

‘Kendall!’ I hissed. ‘Come on, it’s OK. Step on quick.’

‘Noooo!’ Kenny roared. ‘It’s too scary!’

I had to pick him up and lug him on, carrying him over my shoulder. He kicked and screamed, his square-toed shoes kicking me in the tummy.

‘Cut it *out*, Kendall. It’s lovely. Not a bit scary.’

‘We’ll *fall*!’

‘No we won’t. We’re in our glass pod. We’re



going right up high, just like we're flying. Look!

Kendall wouldn't look. He stopped screaming but he stuck his head right inside my jacket and clung tightly. I wanted to get up off my seat and have a proper look, but he moaned whenever I moved.

'You are a wimp, Kendall,' said Mum. 'Here, Lola Rose, I'll take him for a bit.'

'Thanks, Victoria,' I said.

It felt as if we were actors because we hadn't quite got used to using our new names. I loved being called Lola Rose. I unhooked Kendall, parking him with Mum. I stood with my face pressed against the glass. It wasn't quite scary *enough* for me. I wanted to whizz round and round with all of London blurring. I wished our glass pod would fly off by itself, whirling us further and further away from Dad. It felt so much safer up here in the bright blue sky.

I didn't like it when we were back on the ground again. I kept thinking about Dad, looking over my shoulder.

'Don't act so twitchy, Lola Rose, it's getting on my nerves,' said Mum.

'Where are we going now?' said Kendall.

Mum didn't reply. I looked at her. She didn't *know*.

'Let's go shopping,' I said.

We couldn't see any shops, just river and walkways and big buildings. 'Where are the shops, Mum?'

'Well, kind of over there,' said Mum, gesturing



vaguely across the river. 'I suppose we'd better get up on the bridge. So what are you after, Lola Rose? That denim jacket with fur? And shall we get you your little leather jacket, Kendall?'

Kendall didn't react. He was breathing deeply, still a bit snuffly after all that screaming. He was staring up at the building beside us.

'Kendall? Have you forgotten that's your name?' I hissed.

'I know,' he said, not looking at me. He was staring at the sign on the building. 'That's the fish word.'

'Aquarium! Yeah, you're right, my lovely,' said Mum. 'Clever little lad! Imagine a little boy like you knowing a big word like aquarium!'

'Can we buy some fish to be Bubble's friends?'

'Yes, we could maybe buy a new goldfish, and some food and a proper bowl,' I said.

Bubble hadn't looked too clever this morning. We'd cleared the bath of bubbles and left him swimming in this big big pool but Bubble seemed very tired. I had a feeling he wasn't going to last much longer. It would be great if Kendall could be distracted with a whole new fishy family.

But when we went in we saw it wasn't the kind of aquarium where you buy fish. It was like a big fish zoo.

'You just look at these fish, Kendall, you can't buy them. Come on, let's go.'

'I want to look,' said Kendall.

'At a load of old fish?' said Mum. 'Give us a break, Kenny. Kendall. It'll be boring. No, we're



going to the shops and we'll get you a little leather jacket.'

'Please let me see the fish. Will they have sharks?' said Kendall.

'Sharks!' I said, laughing.

But they did have sharks.

I was dawdling along in the dark, peering in at the tanks without much interest, thinking about denim jackets lined with fur. I wished there were some seats somewhere as I was feeling really tired now. Mum was holding Kendall up so he could see some slithery creature at the top of the tank.

I felt that if you'd seen one fish you'd seen them all. These ones weren't much more interesting than Bubble. I wandered round a corner and came to a huge tank that took up the whole wall. I leant against the glass, imagining what it would be like to be a mermaid. I remembered a mermaid cartoon video I watched with Dad ages ago – and then a huge shark swam right past me, jaw open, showing three rows of terrifying teeth an inch away from my nose.

I screamed.

Mum and Kendall came running.

I couldn't stop screaming, though I covered my mouth with both hands.

'What is it, Jayni? Is it Dad? Did you see him?' said Mum, grabbing me.

'There's a shark!' I gasped.

'Oh for God's sake,' said Mum, giving me a little shake. 'You gave me such a scare!'



All these Japanese tourists were pointing at me and laughing.

'You're not scared of *fish*, are you?' said Mum, laughing too.

'It's a *shark*,' I said. 'It was so big and so *close*. It was like it was touching me.'

'*I'm* not scared,' said Kendall. 'I want to see the shark! Where is it?'

'It looks like Lola Rose has frightened it away with all that screaming. Honestly, you're worse than Kendall!'

Then another huge shark – and another and another – came swimming past, with baleful eyes and huge sneery mouths. Mum stepped back smartly.

'Bloody hell!' she said, holding my hand. 'I take it all back. They're *whoppers*!'

'I like them. Sharkie, sharkie, sharkie! Good boys! Come and see me. Open your big mouths. I want to see your teeth,' Kendall begged, standing so close his nose was squashed sideways by the glass.

'Watch out!' I called, clinging to Mum.

'*I am* watching,' said Kendall. 'They're so lovely! Can I have one, Mum, please please please?'

All the tourists collapsed with laughter. I laughed too, but I was still shaking. I *hated* those sharks. I couldn't go near the glass even though I knew they couldn't swim through it. I wanted to rush past to the next room but Kenny stuck to the glass like he had little suckers on his hands and nose. When Mum tried to pull him away he started yelling.



'You kids are driving me nuts!' said Mum. 'Look, you go to the next bit, Lola Rose. We'll catch up when His Lordship has had his fill of the sharks.'

So I hurried on, round the corner and up the ramp. Then I stopped. I was up at the top of the shark tank now. There was no escape. There they were, swimming straight towards me.

I was scared I was going to start screaming again. I ran and ran, blundering down dark tunnels and through twilight rooms, fish flickering all around me. I shot straight through the aquarium to the gift shop at the end. Even the turquoise toy sharks seemed sinister.

I lurked in a far corner for ages and ages. I thought Mum and Kendall would never come. When they eventually came through they were hand in hand, and Kendall was bright pink in the face and beaming.

'Lola Rose, where did you *get* to?' Mum said.

'You were so *silly*, Jayni – sorry, Lola Rose. This man came and told me all about the sharks. There's this big big *big* one called George. He's the best. George can see ten times better than me and he smells heaps better too.'

'Yeah, they can smell one drop of blood *miles* away when they're in the ocean,' said Mum, snapping her teeth in a shark imitation.

'Shut up, Mum.'

'You're not really scared, are you, you big softie? The sharks in these tanks don't eat people. They get fed like fish *paella*, octopus and squid and stuff.'



We'll have to come back and see them fed, won't we, Kendall?'

'Yeah! I want to feed George.'

'I don't think *you* can feed them, sweetheart. We'll have to watch the man. You should have stayed, Lola Rose, it was fascinating.' Mum stared at me and then came up close. 'Jayni. What's all this twitching? What's up with you, you're always so sensible?'

'I *am* sensible. Sensible people hate sharks because they look so ugly and they can rip you apart. You can take Kendall back if you like but I'm never setting foot in this place ever again,' I said. 'Not for anything.'

I walked out of the shop and stood by myself on the embankment. I stared at the river. I knew perfectly well there were no sharks in the Thames but I kept expecting a deadly dorsal fin to streak through the water.

When Mum and Kendall came out at last Kendall was clutching a big fluffy turquoise toy shark. 'Look, look, I've got my very own George!' he cried, racing up to me. 'Attack!' he yelled, whirling George by the tail and then bashing me in the face with him.

It didn't hurt. I knew George was a fluffy toy and his teeth were made of felt – but I still screamed.

'Oh, do stop it, Jayni, you're just acting soft to get attention,' Mum snapped.

I was so hurt I went into a sulk. I wouldn't talk to either of them as we crossed the bridge over the river and walked round Covent Garden. Then



Mum stopped outside this immensely posh French cake and coffee shop. 'Let's live dangerously,' she said, and went inside.

I had to talk to say which cake I wanted. It took me ages to choose because they were all so ultra-yummy and special. I eventually decided on a cream mousse gâteau with strawberries and a swirl of chocolate icing on top. Mum had an elegant almond croissant. Kendall chose a chestnut cream meringue, but he licked it half-heartedly and didn't finish it. So I did. *And* I had a hot chocolate to die for, all whippy with a big peak of cream.

Mum laughed at me. 'You've cheered up now, haven't you, Lola Rose!'

'You bet,' I said.

Then we got started on some serious shopping. We found this posh kids' shop and there was this perfect little black leather jacket that fitted Kendall perfectly. He looked so cute in it. Even the shop assistant clapped her hands and called him a pet. It cost a fortune. 'But I've *got* a fortune,' said Mum, and she handed over a fistful of notes as if they were pennies.

We looked at the girls' jackets too. They had a denim jacket with fur and my heart started beating fast but when I tried it on it was much too small. I could hardly get my arms in and it wouldn't meet across my front.

'I'm too fat,' I said, feeling awful.

'Don't be so daft. You're just getting a big girl, too big for little kids' clothes. We'll find you a



proper furry denim jacket, just you wait and see,' said Mum.

We went into shop after shop after shop. Kendall stopped playing swim-through-the-air games with George and started whining. But then, in the *thirteenth* shop, my lucky number, we found a whole row of ladies' denim jackets lined with fake fur. Cream fur, blue fur, *pink* fur. I tried the pink furry one on, trembling. It fitted perfectly. Well, it was a little too long in the arms, but Mum rolled the sleeves up for me, saying it was the only cool way to wear such jackets anyway.

Mum bought it for me and I went out of the shop wearing it. It felt as if I was being cuddled by the softest teddy bear. I looked great in it, I really did. I kept peering at myself in shop windows. A new cool blue denim pink furry-collared Lola Rose stared back, smiling all over her face.

Mum was quite tempted by the denim jackets too, but then she spotted a white leather jacket, short and sexy. When she tried it on she looked so glamorous, just like a rock star, especially with her dark glasses.

We sashayed out the shop, Lola Rose in her furry blue denim, Victoria in her rock-star white leather, two absolute babes – with a baby, our Kendall, whining for England, dragging George shark by the tail.

We decided to buy him one of his favourite red lollies to shut him up. They'd proved very good dummies in the past. We could see any number of posh places selling Häagen Dazs and Ben &



Jerry's but there weren't any ordinary little corner shops with cheapo ice lollies.

'Perhaps there's one down a side street,' said Mum.

We found a little newsagent eventually. He didn't stock Kendall's strawberry shockers but Mum bought him a fistful of other flavours – orange, mango, blackcurrant, milk.

'There, kiddo, suck on that little lot and shut *up*,' said Mum.

She bought me a white Magnum. I was extra careful eating ice cream in my new denim jacket. I was concentrating so hard on licking cautiously that I almost walked straight past the special shop. It was a bookshop, but these were wonderful books – colouring books, cut-out books, sticker books, hundreds of them.

'Boring!' said Kendall, ice lolly all round his mouth like lipstick. Then he saw a colouring book of fishes of the world. He started clamouring for it, even though he goes horribly over the lines when he uses his own wax crayons and he presses too hard and makes the points furry if I let him near my felt-tip pens.

'OK OK, spoilt brat number two,' said Mum, opening up her magic handbag again. 'What about you, spoilt brat number one? Would you like a fancy colouring book too?'

I found the book I wanted most of all right at the back of this fairyland shop. It was a fat book of reproduction Victorian scraps, all ready to peel off and stick in a scrapbook. There were hundreds



of children in bright pinks and purples playing with cats and dogs, flowers, birds, seaside scenes, Father Christmas, babies, butterflies, angels . . .

‘Oh, Mum. Victoria. Please!’ I whispered.

We spent that evening sitting up in the double bed together watching television. Mum click-flicked through channel after channel. Kendall cuddled up between us, making George swim across the bed and attack poor little Bob the bear again and again. I sat up cross-legged with my scrapbook balanced on both knees, sticking in my new scraps.

My absolute favourites were four enormous angels. They had long golden hair and flowing white robes and great grey wings springing from their shoulder blades. I stuck them in carefully, having to edge them in really close together to fit on the page. When I fell asleep I dreamt the angels were standing at each corner of our bed, wings spread out like feathery curtains protecting us.



# Six



‘Let’s go on the razzle again,’ said Mum, the minute I woke up.

She was already up and dressed. It didn’t look as if she’d slept a lot – but she didn’t act tired. We razzled till we dazzled. We bought new tops, new trousers, new night things and new shoes. Oh, those new shoes – wonderful, strappy sling-back stilettos for Mum and *my* first pair of proper grown-up heels too. They were only *little* heels but I still couldn’t cross the room in them without twisting my ankles.

‘Who cares?’ said Mum. ‘You’ll be fine with a



little bit of practice. All set to go dancing, eh?’

She bought a little CD player and a stack of her favourite CDs. We had our own private disco in the hotel bedroom during the day when the vacuums were roaring and it didn’t matter how much noise we made. Mum especially liked ‘I Will Survive’. She danced to it, punching her arms in the air, and Kendall and I copied her.

The maid came in to clean our bedroom and saw us dancing. She roared with laughter and imitated us, punching her own arms. ‘That’s it, you tell them, girl!’ she said.

She was a very very *large* lady but she was surprisingly good at dancing, jiggling her hips and strutting her stuff.

‘Wasn’t that lady *fat*!’ Kendall whispered when she’d gone. ‘She went wibble wobble, wibble wobble.’

‘If you think she was fat you should see your Auntie Barbara,’ said Mum.

‘Your sister?’ I said. I poked Mum gently in her flat-as-a-pancake tummy. ‘But you’re skinny!’

‘Yep,’ said Mum. ‘We’re complete opposites in every way. I always used to wonder if we had different dads. Our dad couldn’t stick me right from the start.’

‘Did you ask him?’

‘No fear! He’d have given me a clump around the head for cheek,’ said Mum. She bit her thumb again. ‘What is it about me, eh? Why do all the men in my life want to thump me? What am I doing wrong?’



'You're not doing *anything* wrong, Mum! It's them, not you. But you're not you now anyway. You're Victoria and I'm Lola Rose and he's Kendall and we're the Luck Luck Lucky family.'

I put the music on again and whirled Mum round and round, while Kendal did his little jiggle-stomp with George. It was just as well he was so keen on George. Poor Bubble had died in the night. Kendall wanted to bury him properly in a shoebox but Mum said she wasn't mucking about with dead goldfish and tipped Bubble down the toilet.

We had to go back to that awful aquarium every day to keep Kendall happy, visiting the real George and his horrific fishy friends. I stayed outside on the embankment. People kept stopping to talk to me, asking if I was all right. I was scared they might fetch a policeman. And any time a tall guy with long hair and a leather jacket came loping along my heart would thump even though I could see they were all strangers.

'Come in with us, you daft banana,' said Mum.

But I couldn't. I was far too scared of those sharks. I dreamt about those gaping jaws every night. I kept waking up, shaking. Mum was often sitting up smoking, curled in a chair in the dark. I'd squash up beside her and we'd cling together while Kendall snored softly, cuddled under the covers with George.

One night I woke with a start and reached for Mum. She wasn't in the bed, she wasn't in her chair. I found her kneeling in the bathroom, handbag in her lap, five-pound notes all round her in unsteady piles.



'Show me the money!' I whispered, to try to make her laugh.

But she wasn't in a jokey mood. Her face was screwed up, a big vein standing out on her forehead. 'Somebody's stolen some of it!' she said, sniffing furiously.

'They can't have done. You carry it round everywhere with you,' I said.

Mum always clutched the handbag tightly in case someone made a snatch at her bag. She wouldn't even hide it in the hotel room when we went down to breakfast.

*'How can someone have stolen it?'*

'Don't ask me. I just know they bloody have. There's hundreds and hundreds gone missing!'

'We've spent a lot,' I said, kneeling down beside Mum and starting to count the notes.

*'Not that much!'*

I got a piece of paper and wrote down all the clothes we'd bought, all the meals and treats and rides, all the ordinary everyday stuff like ice creams and Mum's ciggies and bus fares.

It started to add up to hundreds and hundreds.

'And we had the night out with Dad, and the taxi and the train fare to London and the first hotel—'

'And we've still got to pay this one too,' said Mum. 'Oh God.'

'I don't think anyone's stolen any, Mum. We've just spent it.'

'Right. OK. You've made your point. We've spent it.' Mum snapped, as if it was all my fault. 'So, Miss



Clever Clogs, what are we going to do when the money runs out altogether?’

I tried to think. My brain wouldn’t work. I never knew what to do when Mum turned on me. ‘Maybe it won’t run out for ages if we’re careful,’ I said. ‘We could move to a smaller hotel. And eat sandwiches. And not go to the aquarium.’

‘Yes, but *then* what? Are we going to sit in doorways and beg? What happens if the police catch us? They’ll want you and Kenny back in school, won’t they? They’ll send you home to your dad . . .’

I started crying. Mum started crying too. She put her arms round me.

‘I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean it. Of course you won’t get sent home.’

‘We won’t any of us have to go home, will we, Mum?’

‘No way, darling. We can’t go back. Your dad was always quite clear what he’d do if I ever tried to leave him.’ Mum was shivering in her thin nightie.

‘I’m scared.’

‘Me too, sweetheart.’ Then Mum took a deep breath. ‘No, sod it, I’m not *going* to be scared. I’m Lady Luck now, right? And my luck’s changed. Hey, maybe I’d better buy some more scratch cards? That’s what we’ll do, buy a whole load of scratch cards every day and eventually we’ll get lucky again.’

I didn’t know if Mum meant it. It seemed a crazy idea but I couldn’t come up with anything better.

We went back to bed and it took me ages to get to sleep. Then I swam among sharks – but when I awoke Mum was already up, dressed in a new



blouse and skirt and her white leather jacket. She was pacing the floor in her new high heels.

I wished I could walk properly in mine. I'd tried to wear them out and turned my ankle so badly the heel snapped straight off the shoe. Mum said we could take them back and get a replacement.

'Can we see about my shoes today, Mum?'

'Maybe. If we've got time.'

'We're not going boring old shopping again, are we?' Kendall said, sitting up in bed. His hair stuck up like dandelion fluff. 'Can we go and see Big George being fed, Mum?'

'Perhaps, pet. But we've got a lot else to do today. We're going to start getting organized, right? I'm going to get a job. And find us a place to live. And get you two into schools. Simple!' said Mum, laughing.

Kendall thought it really was simple and laughed too.

I knew it wasn't simple at all. I was so worried I couldn't eat much breakfast, though Mum told us to tuck in. Mum didn't eat anything at all. She just had cup after cup of tea, going sip sip sip. Her voice still sounded dry and croaky when she asked for our bill at the reception desk. She went white when she saw how much it was, but she counted out the five-pound notes as nonchalantly as she could.

Then we went upstairs to pack. We had to nip out to the shops for another suitcase because we'd bought so much.

The nice fat maid was hoovering the corridor when we came back. Mum told her we were going,



and tucked a couple of five-pound notes in her pocket. 'Thanks for looking after us so well,' she said.

'It's been a pleasure. I shall miss you lot ever so,' she said, stooping with difficulty to give Kendall a big hug. She put her arm round me too and cuddled me close. 'You're a lovely girl, Lola Rose,' she said. 'Have you enjoyed your holiday?'

I looked at Mum.

'We're not exactly on holiday,' said Mum. She raised her eyebrows significantly.

'Aha,' said the maid. 'I get you.'

'We're going to make a new life for ourselves,' said Mum. 'I'm going to need to find some work. There aren't any maids' jobs going here, are there?'

'Well, I could find out,' she said. 'But it's a rubbish job, dear, especially for a pretty little thing like you. The money's lousy, and very few people give a handsome tip like you did. You could get a good office job somewhere really smart. What are you trained for?'

'I'm not trained for anything. I used to do a bit of modelling—'

'There! I *said* you were pretty,' said the maid.

'But I've gone off a bit. I couldn't get that sort of work now, not after having the two kids. And I'm not that great at computers or figures or stuff. I don't think I could work in an office, I'd just get in a muddle.' Mum nibbled at her thumbnail.

'Well, it strikes me office work would get boring,' she said comfortingly. 'You seem like a *people* person. Maybe shop work might be



more in your line? Showing off pretty clothes?’

‘Well maybe,’ said Mum, still biting her thumb. ‘There’s the tills though. I don’t know how you work them. Honestly, I’m just so thick.’

‘No, you’re not, Mum,’ I said, patting her.

It wasn’t her fault. Dad never let her do anything. He kept on telling her she was thick thick thick as a brick and she believed him.

‘Don’t worry, pet, they’ll teach you,’ said the maid. ‘They give you training. They even trained me how to make a bed, though I’ve been making six a day all my adult life.’

‘Six?’

‘My family. Well, there’s eight now, because my Junie’s here with my little grandson Marvin, bless him, though his little cot don’t count.’

‘So you don’t live in the hotel?’ said Mum. ‘I thought if I got a job as a maid then they’d let me have a room for me and the kids.’

‘You’re not much more than a kid yourself,’ she said. ‘The staff don’t live in here. They’d never let you keep the children here anyway. Look, maybe you should go down the social?’

‘No fear! I’m not having them poking their noses into my past.’

‘They won’t. They’ll help. Still, maybe you know best. Are you going to put yourself down on the housing list?’

‘I don’t see how we can. I mean, I lived in a council flat back home. I had to walk out, see. But they’ll say I deliberately made myself homeless. And I’m scared they’d take the kids into care.’



'Well, try one of the special housing associations. They found my sister Elise a lovely place when she left her husband. Well, she's made it lovely now, her and her kids. Shall I give her a quick ring, find out the association address for you? It's a charity but they don't make you feel bad. And they'd never try to take your kids away. Anyone can see you're a brilliant mum.'

She was so kind Mum tried to give her more money but she wouldn't take it. She stowed our bags away when we got packed up and kissed us all and wished us luck. 'You're going to be lucky in life from now on, I can tell,' she said.

Mum's face lit up. 'Yeah, that's me, Lady Luck,' she said.

She took me by one hand and Kendall by the other and we set off. Mum sang all the lucky songs she could think of while we got the tube to the housing association place.

We were on the tube so long it was like we'd made a journey into the centre of the earth. When we emerged at last I pretended to Kendall that we were in Australia now and told him to watch out for koalas and kangaroos.

'And sharks!' said Kendall. 'They have sharks in the sea in Australia. Let's go to the seaside.'

'Will you quit winding him up, Lola Rose,' Mum snapped.

She was looking at the tacky parade of shops and the scattered French fries on the pavement and the boys goofing around outside the video shop.

'It's a bit of a dump, isn't it? Maybe it's a bit daft



wanting to live here. There must be heaps of housing associations.'

'Yeah, but it's so out the way, Mum, it feels kind of safe. Dad wouldn't ever come looking for us here, would he? And yet all the time we're wandering around the West End you feel there's a chance he might come barging round the corner.'

'I *want* Dad to come round the corner,' said Kendall. 'I want Dad. I want to go home. I don't like Australia.'

'It's not Australia, you nut,' I said, laughing at him. 'It was just a *joke*.'

'*Don't* joke, Jayni!' said Kendall, and he started hitting me with his fists, with George, with his hard little head.

'Hey, hey! Ouch! Stop it, Kendall!' I said, scooping him up and whirling him round and round.

I could usually cheer him out of a tantrum that way. It didn't work this time. He just sobbed dismally.

'Don't, Kendall,' I said, shifting him onto my hip.

'I'm Kenny!' he wept.

'Poor little kid, he doesn't know who he is or where's he going,' said Mum. 'You shouldn't have got him all wound up with that Australia lark.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Kendall.'

'Kenny!'

'No. Not any more,' said Mum, cupping his damp face and looking straight into his eyes. 'This bit isn't a joke, darling. You and me and Jayni, we've all run away. Run away for good. We've run away from your dad because he kept hitting me.'



'Because you were bad,' said Kenny.

'Mum's *not* bad, you stupid little boy!' I said, giving him a shake.

'Leave him be, Jayni. He's only parroting your dad. He doesn't really mean it,' said Mum. 'Now listen, sweetheart. No one ever deserves to get hit. *You* shouldn't ever hit anyone. You're a good boy. And Jayni's a good girl and I'm not going to risk either of you getting hurt. So we're starting our new life and we're going to make it work, right?'

'Right!' I said. I nudged Kendall. 'Say right!'

'Wrong,' Kendall mumbled into the pink fur of my denim jacket, but now he was joking.

He behaved like a little lamb in the housing association office. 'I'm Kendall Luck and I'm five years old,' he announced to everyone. His eyelashes were still wet and his little peaky face looked very earnest.

Everyone smiled and said, 'Bless him!'

It was Kenny who got us a home. We waited for ages and then a lady with glasses took down all our details. Mum was fine at first, making up all sorts of stuff, sounding so convincing, even though she was going nibble nibble on her thumbnail. But then we were led into another big room full of waiting people. It took another age before it was our turn to see anyone and then Mum had to start all over again saying the same stuff to a man with a beard while he filled in another form.

I knew Mum wouldn't be able to remember every little detail of her story. She'd been making it up as she went along. She had a stab at it, gabbling



quicker and quicker to get it over with, but she got stuck when they asked about our schools. She'd made up a name before and they'd written it down. Mum tried to remember it, a vein standing out on her forehead. She looked at me desperately.

'Tell them the name of your school, Jayni,' she said.

*Jayni.*

I started saying something quick but the man wasn't listening. He put down his pen. 'Jayni?' he said. He looked at me. 'I thought you were called Lola?'

'She is; Lola Rose. Jayni's just a silly nickname – Jayni-Payni, we've called her that for fun since she was little,' Mum said.

It was clear the man with the beard didn't believe a word she was saying. 'Mrs Luck, I get the feeling you've been a little economical with the truth,' he said. 'Some of your details don't quite add up. You need to be completely frank with us about your previous domestic circumstances. Now I'm sure you've got your reasons—'

'Yes, I've got my bloody reasons,' said Mum, going red. She yanked at her blouse and showed the man the bruises, still as purple as pansies. 'We're running away from the guy who did this to me, right? He's started on his daughter too – there'll be no stopping him now. I'm trying to make a fresh start and do my best for my kids. There's no going back. He'll kill us.'

'Have you been to the police?'

Mum snorted. 'What are they going to do?'



'Lock him up?'

'For how long? And what about his mates? And what happens when he's let out? What happens to us then?'

'I take your point, Mrs Luck. I do understand.'

'No you don't. You can take my point and shove it straight up your bottom,' said Mum, standing up. 'I suppose you're not going to find us somewhere to live now?'

'That sort of abuse isn't helpful, certainly. I will still try to help you but I can't work miracles. I'll put your family on our waiting list.'

'And what are we supposed to do meanwhile? Sit in the gutter for six months?'

Mum called him a very very rude name and then stood up. 'Come on, kids, we're going. This is a waste of time.'

Kenny looked at his hands. He looked at the chair he'd been sitting on. He looked under it. His mouth went into a letter-box shape and he started howling.

He howled and howled and howled. He wouldn't stop when I picked him up. He wouldn't stop when Mum picked him up. He wouldn't stop when the lady with glasses brought him a biscuit.

'What's the *matter* with him?' said the bearded man.

'He can't take any more,' Mum bellowed above the wails. 'It's all too much for him. We've been on the run for weeks now. I promised him I'd get him a home today. He just wants to feel *safe*.'

Everyone fussed over Kendall and looked at the



bearded man as if he were deliberately torturing my little brother. Luckily Kendall was crying too hard to draw breath and say what it was he wanted.

‘Well, I suppose we might be able to put you in the emergency category. There *is* a property available – it’s not ideal, and it’s not in good decorative order, but if it’ll act as a stop-gap . . . ?’

We were given the key to our new home just like that. We had to whizz Kenny away sharpish before he started going on about George.

We hunted for him all the way down the road back to the station but we didn’t catch a glimpse of furry fin. He must have been left on the tube.

Mum took Kenny into the hotel to thank the lovely fat maid and collect our suitcases. She furtively pressed three fivers into my hand. She didn’t have to tell me what to do. I ran all the way to the aquarium, begged to be let straight into the gift shop, and bought George the Second.



Seven

## Our New Home



Our new home was the middle flat of a small, damp Edwardian house with a tarpaulin over the roof and nettles rioting in the garden. The front door was warped so we had to put our shoulders against it before it would budge. The hallway was littered with freebie papers and advertising circulars so we had to kick our way through them.

Our flat was up one flight of stairs. We had a living room with a kitchen area in one corner, a tiny bedroom and a toilet with a shower and basin. The walls were a dirty cream like sour milk, with black mould in the corners. The windowsills were wet



with condensation, the wood soft and rotten. The curtains hung limply against the damp glass. There was a stained carpet covering most of the living-room floor and a greasy cooker and a fridge – but no proper furniture.

Mum and Kendall and I walked round the flat. We walked round it again.

‘Where *is* everything?’ Kendall asked.

‘You may well ask,’ said Mum. She looked like she was going to start crying any minute.

‘Where *is* everything?’ I said quickly, copying Kendall.

She frowned at me – and then cottoned on. ‘You may well ask,’ she said.

‘Where *is* everything?’ Kendall and I chorused.

‘You may well ask,’ said Mum.

We went through this crazy routine over and over again, rushing round the room, gabbling it faster and faster until the words became gobbleddegook. We ended up in a giggly heap on the carpet.

‘Oh, quick, get up, kids, it’s so dirty!’ said Mum, pulling a face. ‘We’ll have to get carpet shampoo and lots of Flash. And three scrubbing brushes. And we’ll buy some paint, brighten the place up. What colour, Lola Rose?’

‘Purple!’

‘*Purple?* OK, blow it, purple it is. We can have a purple bedroom, bed, carpet, rug, curtains. We can even paint *you* purple and all, if that’s what you want.’

‘And a purple living room?’



'No, it's my turn. I rather fancy a black and white theme, dead stylish, white walls, black leather furniture – with a zebra-striped rug on the floor. And I'll recline on it in a black negligée, yeah?'

'Eating black and white humbugs! Kendall, are you going to choose the bathroom colours? You could have turquoise like your horrible aquarium. We'll have a big glass tank for a bath and you can swim around inside it with George.'

'Don't start him off!' said Mum. 'She's just joking, Kendall.'

'What about my purple bedroom, Mum? Is that a joke too?'

'No, we're going to do a total *Changing Rooms* on this old dump, I promise you, darling. Money no object. Well, within reason.'

We were told about this special charity stores place where you got given all kinds of furniture if you were in need. Mum still had wads and wads of lottery money left but she'd started to worry about it now. We did go into town to look at furniture but one big squashy leather three-piece suite was three thousand pounds!

'Blow that for a lark. We'll see what these stores have got. If it's all a lot of flea-infested old rubbish then we'll just say no thanks, right?' said Mum.

But we said yes please, yes please. We even got a black leather sofa! It was old and cracked, but it still looked lovely. We found two black velvet chairs that almost matched and a fluffy rug that came up white after a good scrubbing. We got a double bed too, though Mum bought a brand-new mattress



because she said she felt funny about sleeping in someone else's bedding. She bought a deep purple duvet cover just to please me, and spent a whole day painting the walls lilac.

I made her a special card with some of my best Victorian scraps, a big bright heart and bunches of lilies and roses and a host of angels swooping up and down like bungee jumpers. I wrote inside, 'You are an angel, Mum. X X X from Lola Rose', and I stuck a big red rose beside my name. Kendall added a wobbly K and his own kisses.

I put it in a proper envelope and then pretended it had been delivered by the postman. We didn't get any real post because no one knew where we were. No one knew us at all. This wasn't like a holiday any more. This was our new life.

I kept thinking about my old life and my old friends. They'd think it so weird that I'd vanished into thin air. *Thick* air. Mum was smoking more and more to steady her nerves. Our flat was grey with smoke haze. It made me cough but Mum said I was putting it on. Maybe I was, just a little bit.

Kendall coughed a lot too, but that was because he cried a lot. I suppose he was missing Dad. He often called out for him when he woke up in the night. Sometimes he didn't wake up quite quick enough and wet the bed. Mum threatened to put Kendall back in nappies if he did it again. He did, so Mum tucked a towel into his pants. Kendall howled with humiliation.

'You shouldn't get so cross with him, Mum. He can't help it. He's just upset.'



'Yeah, well, *I* shall be upset if he ruins that brand-new mattress. And you can stop being so mealy-mouthed, Miss Goody-Goody Two-Shoes,' said Mum. 'You don't half get on my nerves sometimes, Jayni.'

'Lola Rose.'

'OK, Lola Flipping Fancy-Pants Rose, just you remember I'm your *mum*. Stop acting like you're my big sister, for God's sake. You're not meant to tell me what to do. I'll do what I like, see.'

Mum looked in her handbag for her cigarettes. The packet was empty. 'Oh, bum. Run down the road to the corner shop, Jay— Lola Rose.'

'It's gone ten, Mum. It'll be shut.'

It had taken hours to settle Kendall. He'd had one of his crying fits. He was still snuffling in his sleep.

Mum bit her thumbnail agitatedly. 'For God's sake, I'm not going all night without a fag, I'm gasping. Look, there must be a pub somewhere. I'll nip out and buy myself some cigarettes from the machine. You go to bed, OK?'

'OK,' I said uncertainly. I didn't want her to go out in the dark by herself just in case something happened to her.

'You'll be fine, silly,' Mum said, not understanding. 'If there's any emergency then go and get someone in the house to help. Maybe not the old lady, she's a bit gone in the head, but the lads up above seem fine.'

We'd got to the stage of nodding at our new neighbours. Miss Parker, the old lady, proved a



real nosy parker and asked all kinds of questions. We got worried, but she asked the exact same questions the next day and the next. It was obvious she didn't remember a word we told her.

Steve and Andy, the two men who lived in the flat above us, looked a bit peeved the first time we met them. We were coming up the stairs loaded with shopping bags from Tesco. Kendall was howling because he'd fallen over, Mum was shouting at him for being a big baby, I was moaning because there had been a special offer on Sara Lee chocolate cake and she wouldn't buy it. We were probably making quite a lot of noise.

Mum stopped shouting and smiled at Steve, the tall handsome one. Andy, the smaller guy with glasses, said hi to Kendall and me and helped us haul the shopping bags through to our kitchen. He told us their names. I said I was Lola Rose. Steve raised his eyebrows but Andy said he thought it was a beautiful name.

Steve acted like he was too grand to talk to us. He *did* seem too grand for this dump of a house. Andy was much more matey and told us how their old flat had been repossessed and so they'd had to come here.

'On a temporary basis,' said Steve.

'But we've still made it into our little home,' said Andy. 'And I love the way you've done up your flat, Lola Rose. It looks really great, especially the purple bedroom. Very artistic.'

I liked Andy *much* more than Steve. I still didn't think I could rush to him in an emergency though.



I hated that word. The moment Mum left our flat EMERGENCY flashed in my mind like neon lighting. Phantom alarms clanged in my head. My heart went thud thud thud inside my chest.

It was very quiet in the flat. We didn't have a television yet so I couldn't switch it on to make things sound normal. Miss Parker's telly buzzed down below, as if people were whispering bad things about me beneath my feet. Steve and Andy walked round upstairs and every time their floorboards creaked I jumped.

I kept going to check the door to make sure it was locked. I imagined someone was outside, listening, ready to shove his shoulder to the door and come bursting in. I peered out into the garden to make sure no one was creeping up on us. I could only see my own face reflected in the glass. It reminded me of the aquarium. I shut the curtains quick.

I wanted to huddle into a ball on the old leather sofa. No, I wanted to hide behind it like a really little kid. But Kendall was in the bedroom and I had to keep an eye on him. I considered climbing into bed beside him but I didn't want to take my clothes off and lie down in the dark. I needed to be fully dressed and on my toes.

I patrolled the flat. It still seemed horribly empty even now we had the stuff from the stores. It only took a few seconds to check each room. It didn't really help.

When I was in the bedroom I was sure someone was lurking in the living room, slyly cracking open



a can of beer, sitting there on the sofa, *waiting*. When I was in the living room I felt someone might have got behind the door in the bathroom, ready to pounce. When I dared go into the bathroom, pushing the door inch by inch, I was sure someone had climbed through the bedroom window and was pulling Kendall out of bed, hand over his mouth to stop him screaming.

I knew Dad didn't know where we were. How could he possibly track us down? But I was still so scared I had to put on my new furry denim jacket to stop myself shivering. 'Come *back*, Mum!' I whispered, over and over.

She wasn't back by half past ten. Maybe she'd had to walk a long way to find a pub with a cigarette machine – though she was wearing her strappy sandals with high stiletto heels so she couldn't walk *that* far.

I waited and waited, staring at the clock. I started nodding my head in time to the tick and tock until I went dizzy. I tried to read one of Mum's magazines but the words jiggled about on the page and wouldn't make sense.

I got my scrapbook out and started cutting out a lovely picture of a girl rock star with long blonde hair and a jewelled navel and shiny brown legs in white leather boots. The floorboards gave a sudden creak and I cut off one of the boots by mistake. I tried to sellotape it back but it made her leg look wonky.

My own legs felt wonky as I paced the flat. It was gone eleven now. The pubs closed then. So where was Mum?



*Something's happened to her*, said the Voice of Doom.

Quarter past eleven.

Half past eleven.

I didn't know what to do. Maybe Dad had stalked her. I imagined him laying into her and she went as limp as my paper scrap. I wanted to rush out and find her but I couldn't leave Kendall on his own.

I started to cry, knuckling my eyes. I pressed harder until it hurt. I told myself to stop the silly snivelling. I wasn't a baby. I mustn't panic. Of course Dad hadn't found her. Maybe she'd simply got lost coming back from the pub? Mum had a hopeless sense of direction at the best of times, and now it was way after dark in a strange neighbourhood. Knowing Mum, she'd maybe even forgotten our address. She'd be stumbling round and round in her strappy sandals, cursing herself for being such a fool. She'd find us eventually, she'd be knocking at the door any minute, she'd rush in laughing . . .

But she didn't rush in.

I listened for her footsteps. I opened the curtains and stared out at the street. I even left the door on the latch and rushed down to the corner just to see if there was any sign of her.

Then I worried that someone might have slipped in and be after Kendall. I ran back and slammed the door shut and rushed into the bedroom. Kendall was still sleeping soundly in the middle of the bed, his arms and legs splayed out so he took up nearly all the space. There was no one hovering over him. I checked behind the door, the wardrobe, even



under the bed. I knew I was acting crazy. I couldn't help it.

I went back into the kitchen and tried to make a cup of tea to calm myself. I was so jumpy I splashed cold water all down my front as I filled the kettle.

It was midnight.

Something *must* have happened to Mum.

So what would happen to Kendall and me?

I started crying again as the kettle boiled. I was making such a noise that I didn't hear the door. I didn't hear footsteps. Then Mum was in the kitchen, right in front of me.

'Mum!' I gasped, pouring water everywhere.

'Watch out, you'll scald yourself, you silly girl,' said Mum. 'Here, let me. I could do with a cuppa too.'

'Where have you *been*? It's gone midnight!'

'So? Who am I, flipping Cinderella?' said Mum, peering down at her sandals. 'Are these glass slippers I see before me?' She didn't exactly slur her words but she was acting silly.

'You've been down the pub drinking while I've been worrying myself sick wondering where you are!'

Mum started laughing. 'You sound so funny, Jayni, like you're *my* mum!'

'It's not funny! I was so scared Dad had got you,' I cried. I started trying to hit her, like Kendall in a tantrum.

'Hey, hey, hey,' said Mum. She caught hold of my wrists and pulled me close. She wrapped her arms round me. 'I'm so sorry, babe. I didn't realize. You



always act so grown up. But there's no need to be scared about your dad, not any more. We're never ever going to see him again. We're new people now, remember, Lola Rose. I'm Lady Luck – and guess what, we're *in* luck, darling. I've got a job!

'A job?' What kind of a job could Mum have got at midnight, for goodness' sake? For *badness*' sake?

'That's why I was such ages, darling. I thought you'd be fast asleep, cuddled up with Kendall. I don't want my girl worried – my lovely Lola Rose.' Mum stroked my hair and gave me a big kiss. She was a little bit drunk but it didn't matter. She never got really scary like Dad.

'Tell me about this job, Mum,' I said.

'I'm going to be a bar girl, plus help out with meals at lunch time.'

I relaxed against her. 'You've got a job in the pub?'

'Yeah, it's only five minutes away, it'll be brilliant. I walked in to buy my fags and I got talking to one of the guys behind the bar. He told me the manager needed more staff so I thought, OK, go for it, girl, so I did. I saw the manager, Barry – he's ever so nice. He put me through my paces after he'd closed for the night. He says I'm a natural at pulling a good pint and I can remember any number of orders and I know all the different drinks. Well, I ought to, seeing as I grew up in a pub. I told Barry I didn't have a clue how to work the till so he showed me and of course I cocked it up at first, went all panicky, but he didn't shout, he just went over it again and again until I got it. He's a lovely guy, Barry, so gentle and yet manly with it.'



I went tense again. 'You're not going to start a thing with this Barry, are you?'

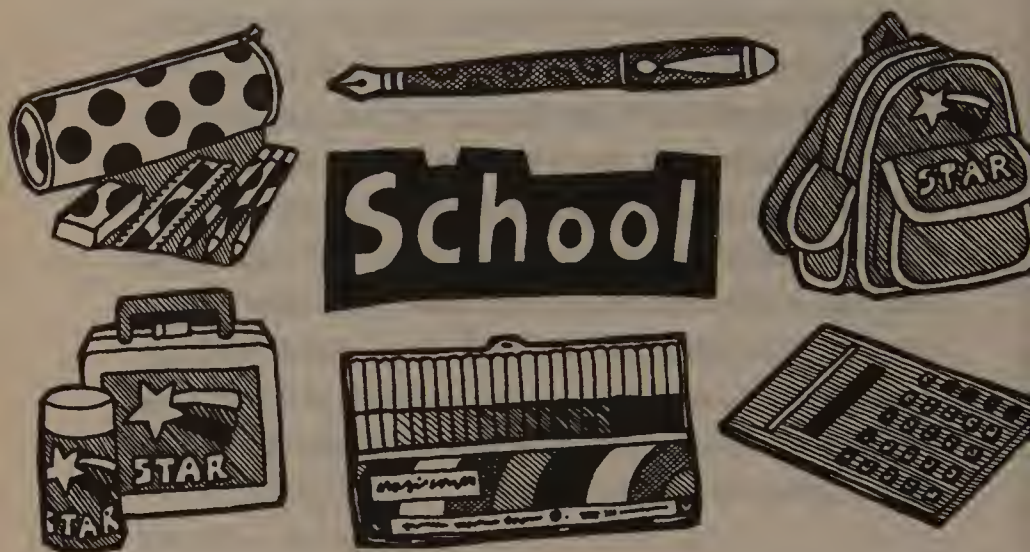
'Don't be so daft, darling. He's got a wife, a nice woman, Lynn – she was kind too,' Mum said, but with less enthusiasm. 'Anyway, isn't it great? Job sorted, just like that, when I only nipped out for a packet of fags.' Mum lit up a cigarette triumphantly.

'Will it mean you working evenings, Mum?'

'You won't really mind, will you? You've babysat for Kendall heaps of times before, no bother. And it won't be every evening; my hours will vary. I don't have to start till midday though, which will be great. I'll be here to give you guys breakfast and get you off to school. Well, when you *get* a school. That's next on the agenda!'



# Eight



I wished we didn't have to go to *any* school. I hadn't always got on at my old school. The lessons were OK. It just took me ages to find a friend. When my dad was in prison some of the other kids kept picking on me. Then when he came out Dad got into fights with *their* dads and then they started fighting me.

If it was hard for me it would be hopeless for Kendall. He got trampled on in his reception class.

'I've *been* to school, Mum,' he said. 'I don't need to go again.'



'Yeah, right, I've been to school too, Mum,' I said. 'Do we really have to go?'

'Oh come on, Lola Rose, don't be so daft. You've got to go to school, it's the law. Now, there's a nice primary down by the church. The kids wear a very smart uniform. We'll nip down there tomorrow morning and get you both registered,' said Mum.

It wasn't that simple. We didn't even get to see the headteacher because we didn't have a proper appointment. They told us we didn't have a hope of getting into the school as all the classes were full. They had a long waiting list of children desperate to go there. You had to have a sibling already registered and live in the right catchment area and be a regular worshipper at the church.

'Well, that's that then,' said Mum, as we walked out.

'Hurray!' said Kendall, skipping. 'No school!'

'Not *that* school, sweetheart. I wouldn't want to send you there anyway, all those poncy rules and regulations. We'll find you another better school, no bother.'

It was a lot of bother. Mum got a list of the local schools from the public library and started phoning round. They were nearly all full up. One said they could take Kendall but not me. Another said their reception class was too big already but they had room for me. The schools were miles apart so that was no good. I'd have to collect Kendall after school now Mum was working down the pub.

Larkrise Primary was right at the bottom of the



list. Mum got straight through to the headteacher, Ms Balsam.

'Yes, we've got places, Mrs Luck. Bring Lola Rose and Kendall along as soon as you like,' she said.

'There!' said Mum triumphantly. 'I knew our luck would last. Larkrise! Doesn't that sound pretty, like a little country village school?'

She walked us to Larkrise, holding our hands, singing, '*Follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the Larkrise Road*'. She even started doing that little *Wizard of Oz* dance, pointing her feet and sashaying left and right. She tried to get us to do the dance too but I felt a fool and wouldn't and Kendall tried hard but couldn't.

Even Mum stopped dancing when we turned into Larkrise Road. There were no larks rising. Only the scabbiest one-legged pigeons pecked at pizza crusts in the gutter. Big council flats towered above us in every direction, grey and bleak, water stains running down the brick as if every window eye was weeping.

- We hadn't noticed the wind before but now it blew coldly in our faces and whirled the litter round our ankles. We had to pick our way carefully through sprinklings of chips and crumpled cans and dog mess. Mum gripped Kendall's hand firmly, steering him this way and that. My throat went dry. I hugged myself tight inside my furry denim jacket. It looked like I was going to have to keep it on all day or else it would get nicked.

The school looked exactly like a prison. It was an



ugly, squat, yellow-brick building with barbed wire hooked along the top of the wall and two padlocks on the iron bars of the gates.

‘Is that to keep people out or the kids in?’ Mum said, wavering. She gave the gates a little rattle. ‘How do *we* get in, for God’s sake? Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.’

Kendall jumped up and pressed a button on the wall. The intercom crackled into action. We all took a step backwards.

‘Quick, let’s go,’ I said.

Mum dithered.

A mystery voice said, ‘Yes, can I help you?’

Mum cleared her throat and spoke to the brick wall. ‘My name’s Victoria Luck. I’m here with my two children, Lola Rose and Kendall.’

I couldn’t hear our new names enough times. It made us all feel better. Mum swept her hair out of her white leather collar. I folded my arms and stuck my fingers up inside my sleeves, stroking the fur lining. Kendall squared his tiny shoulders in his hip jacket.

‘Kendal *mint cake!*’ he said. He looked at us expectantly. He’d made the same joke a thousand and one times but we smiled all the same.

‘Do come in,’ said the voice. There was a little buzzing sound and a side gate opened all by itself.

‘It’s like that fairy tale. You know, *Beauty and the Beast*,’ I said.

‘You be Beauty. I’ll be the Beast,’ said Kendall, pulling what he hoped was a hideous face. He hobbled lopsidedly across the playground.



'Will you stop that, Kendall! They'll think you've got disabilities,' said Mum. 'Oh God, I'm dying for a fag. Do you think they'd mind?'

'You *can't*, Mum.'

But when we were shown in Ms Balsam's office we smelt a very familiar stale fag. I saw an overflowing ashtray on her desk. She saw me staring at it and emptied it quickly into her wastepaper basket.

'Sorry, sorry, sorry! *Horrible* habit,' she said. 'Never start smoking, Lola Rose. You'll end up looking like a smoked haddock, just like me.'

She did look a little fishy, her beady eyes magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses, and her long pale face was a bit yellowy. She wasn't a bit pretty but she didn't seem to care. She had a very posh voice but she didn't *act* posh and her clothes certainly weren't posh. She was wearing comfy old trousers and a creased jacket with bulging pockets.

She saw Mum looking longingly at the ashtray and patted her pocket. 'Shall we have a cigarette, Mrs Luck, and blow being a bad influence on the children?' She took out a packet of cigarettes and a novelty lighter in the shape of a fish. You flicked the head and the flame flared inside the jaws.

'Is that a shark?' Kendall asked.

'It doesn't look quite fierce enough for a shark,' said Ms Balsam.

'I love sharks. I don't care if they're fierce, I'm not a bit scared of sharks, am I, Mum?'

'Shh now, Kendall,' said Mum.



‘No, it’s OK, I want to have a chat with both the children.’

‘I’ve seen *lots* of sharks. They’re my friends. But silly old Jayni’s scared of them!’

Mum and I froze. But Ms Balsam acted like she hadn’t even noticed he’d called me by the wrong name. ‘Could that *possibly* be a shark peeping out of your super-cool jacket, Kendall?’ she asked.

‘Yes! It’s George the Second. I had another George but he ran away.’

‘*Swam* away?’ said Ms Balsam. She looked at me. ‘I gather you don’t care for sharks, Lola Rose?’

‘I can’t stick them,’ I said.

‘So what are you interested in?’

I shifted in my seat.

‘What do you like doing best?’

‘My scrapbook.’

Mum sighed. ‘No, Lola Rose, she means hobbies. Well, you like crayoning and I’ve shown you how to do a little dance routine, haven’t I?’

‘What do you put in your scrapbook?’ Ms Balsam persisted. ‘Do you cut out pictures of your favourite band and football team?’

‘I like cutting out all different bits and making it all look good on the page,’ I said.

‘Sometimes she goes a bit nuts and gives ladies animal heads and has a giant girl standing on the roof of a building,’ says Mum, shaking her head.

‘Collage!’ says Ms Balsam. ‘That’s what it’s called. Oh great, we’ll do some collage work in art. I’ll be taking you for art, Lola Rose. I’m helping out because we’re a few teachers short. Right, I just



need to take down a few details. Which was your last school?’

I swallowed. I tried to think of a name, *any* name. ‘It was . . . London Primary,’ I said stupidly.

‘London *Park* Primary,’ Mum said quickly.

Ms Balsam wrote it down, but she frowned a little. Maybe we weren’t fooling her. I could just as easily have said Mickey Mouse Made-up School.

‘And what about Kendall? Was he in the reception class at London Park?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Mum.

‘No!’ said Kendall, looking astonished. ‘I’m at Molesfield Infants and I’ve got a blazer with a mole and a field on the badge.’

‘Shut up, Kendall,’ I said. I looked at Ms Balsam. ‘He’s making it up. He does it all the time. Doesn’t he, Mum?’

‘Yeah,’ said Mum helplessly, drawing deeply on her cigarette.

Ms Balsam put down her pen and looked straight at me. ‘We all make things up when it’s necessary, Lola Rose. Or we simply keep quiet about things. *I* keep quiet about things. For instance, my lovely school might very well be closed down at the end of the school year because the silly inspectors feel we should be doing much better. We’re on emergency measures at the moment.’

‘Ah, I wondered how come you had spare places for the kids,’ said Mum. ‘So if the school’s going to close there’s not much point my two starting here, is there?’



‘I’m determined we’re *not* going to close,’ said Ms Balsam. ‘I’m very proud of my school and my staff and my wonderful pupils. They come from all different backgrounds and yet I like to feel we all fit together as a family. We’re used to refugee children and others from troubled backgrounds, Mrs Luck. We don’t always dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ in our paperwork because we’re too busy to pry into people’s private affairs.’ She picked up her form and tossed it in the wastepaper basket with the cigarette butts.

Mum smiled and raised her eyebrows at me. ‘There now, isn’t that lucky?’ she said. ‘That’s very understanding of you, Ms Balsam. So, can I leave the kids with you today?’

‘Certainly. I’ll take them along to their classes – unless you’d like to come with Kendall to settle him in?’

‘Lola Rose might be better. Our Kenny—Kendall tends to play up a bit with me.’

Mum gave us both a quick kiss and then dashed off with an airy wave before we could take in she was abandoning us. Kendall’s mouth wobbled, the corners turning tight down. I had to fight not to cry myself. It was OK for Mum. She didn’t have to stick it out at this scary new school with all these tough kids who would hate us because we were new and weird.

But it wasn’t scary at all! Ms Balsam let me hold Kendall’s hand tight while she took us into the reception class. There were loads of little kids messing around finger painting, bashing bricks,



kneading red dough and trooping in and out of a little playhouse. A big girl with long fair hair in a ponytail and dungarees was having a funny paint-brush fight with a scabby little boy with a bristly head.

I thought she was an older sister like me but it turned out she was Ms Denby, the *teacher*. She gave Kendall a big smile as if she'd known him all her life. 'Hello, darling. What's your name, then?'

Kendall swallowed and looked at me, scared to speak in case he said something wrong again.

'His name's Kendall,' I announced.

The scabby boy sniggered. A plump little girl with a topknot stuck her chin out. '*I'm* Kendall,' she said.

'Kendall's a girl's name,' said Scabby. He laughed. The other boys did too.

'It's a girl's name *and* a boy's name. Didn't you know that?' said Ms Denby. 'Welcome to our class, Kendall. What would you like to do? How about finger painting?'

Kendall's hand screwed itself up inside mine. He hates getting his hands dirty.

'How about the dough?' said Ms Denby.

Kendall shuddered at the thought of getting it up his fingernails.

'He wants to build a big tower of bricks,' I suggested. I knew he should make a safe, boy's choice.

Kendall was staring at the playhouse. 'I don't want to do bricks,' he said. 'I want to go in that little house with George.'



I held my breath, waiting for the scabby kid to sneer. Surprisingly no one seemed to think it sissy to go and play house. When I led Kendall over I found two little boys and one little girl crouched inside, having a tea party.

‘Do you want tea or coffee?’ the little girl asked, laying a place for Kendall with her blue plastic tea set.

‘Coffee. Black. And a ciggie too,’ said Kendall.

‘Coming right up,’ she said, pouring imaginary coffee and lighting an invisible cigarette for him.

Kendall took it from her and inhaled thin air with appreciation. ‘Thanks, babe,’ he said.

Ms Denby and Ms Balsam and I were in silent stitches. Ms Denby gave me a thumbs-up sign. I nodded and went off with Ms Balsam. She patted my shoulder.

‘There, he’s settled in already,’ she said.

We both knew it might not be so easy for me. I felt sick when we walked into the Year Six class-room. I thought I was quite tall but lots of the girls were much bigger than me, and so grown-up! They wore tight designer tops that showed their figures, and they had elaborate plaited hairstyles and nose rings and fantastic fingernails.

OK, not *all* the girls. There were a couple of little scruffy twitchy girls who looked sad. Then there were a clump of girls with big headscarves who all sat together. There was another Asian girl sitting by herself. She had her hair in a long glossy plait and when she grinned she had a gap in her front teeth. She was grinning at me.



She came up to me at play time. 'I love your jacket!' she said, stroking it admiringly. 'I'm Harpreet. What's your name again? Lola?'

'Lola Rose.'

'Cool name!'

I didn't need to worry. I wasn't sad old Jayni who got picked on.

I was cool Lola Rose in her fantastic furry jacket.



# Nine



So now we were the Luck family – Victoria, Kendall and Lola Rose – and we had a whole new life going for us. It was strange how quickly it stopped feeling new. After a few weeks it was weird thinking back to the *old* life. I didn't feel fussed when someone asked me my name and wanted to know where I lived. I felt like I'd been Lola Rose for ever. I could have grown up in Flexley Park and been at Larkrise Primary all my school life.

Harpreet was the sort of best friend I'd always longed for. We sat next to each other in class and helped each other with all our work. She was



brilliant at maths and IT and science. I'm OK at English and better at art so it worked a treat.

Ms Balsam *did* do a special collage lesson! She brought in a huge pile of old magazines for us to cut up. She suggested we do a picture with a family theme. Harpreet flipped through a big glossy magazine, trying to find photos of people who looked like *her* family. She had a huge family – her mum and dad, a little sister, a big sister, two big brothers, and hundreds of aunties and uncles and cousins and her grandma and grandpa out in India. She started moaning because all the people in the photos were too pink.

'You can colour them with brown felt pen if you like. Or maybe you can find stuff that kind of *represents* your family,' I said.

'Like what?' said Harpreet.

'Like ... you could find someone with a big smiley mouth and cut it out and then find a white rabbit and a top hat and that could be your dad,' I said. I loved Harpreet's funny dad. He made a big fuss of me and did all these daft conjuring tricks, pretending to find eggs behind my ears and a string of coloured hankies from the sleeve of my new jacket.

'What about his body?' said Harpreet, who didn't quite get it.

'You don't need to show the actual people. Look, your mum could be represented by lots of gold jewellery and a television set because she can't miss any of her soaps. Your brother Amrit could be a state-of-the-art computer, right?'



‘What shall I be?’ said Harpreet.

‘You can be sweets and a long plait and lots of little numbers because you’re good at maths and you could find two linked hands and colour friendship bracelets round the wrists and they could be you and me.’

‘You have such *good* ideas, Lola Rose,’ said Harpreet. ‘I’m so lucky having you as my friend.’

I helped Harpreet stick all her family on a bright pink background with a border of red hearts and yellow flowers. We outlined everything with a gold glitter pen. It looked lovely.

‘I can’t wait to show Dad,’ said Harpreet. ‘I bet he’ll frame it and hang it in the lounge.’ She paused. ‘What about *your* dad, Lola Rose?’

‘I haven’t got one,’ I said. I selected a large piece of turquoise paper for my own collage.

‘You must have had a dad *once*,’ said Harpreet. ‘What’s that blue for? Is that going to be sky?’

‘It’s going to be water,’ I said.

I cut out a pink girl and added bright yellow hair way down past her waist. I fashioned a tail from a photo of green grass and made her into a mermaid. I cut little red roses for her hair and wound them round and round her long tail in a garland. I stuck her up at the top of the water, waving to a little green frog leaping up and down on a lily pad.

I searched for a woman pretty enough to be Mum but I couldn’t find one, so I turned a beautiful white statue into a water nymph. I added lots more golden curls and inked tiny black musical notes coming out of her parted lips.



I cut out more red roses, a great fluttering drift of them, and stuck them in a big red heart round the mermaid and the frog and the statue. It looked like it was keeping them safe. The rest of the blue paper looked a bit bare so I stuck on some buried treasure and a little aeroplane sailing like a ship and ice lollies swimming along like a shoal of fish.

I wanted to stop there, but I couldn't. I cut out a shark from a nature magazine. I didn't like touching it with my fingers even though I knew it was only paper. I didn't want it in my picture. I wanted to rip it into little bits. But I stuck it down right at the very bottom of the page. It was looking up up up through the water at the three people caged in the heart.

'That looks scary,' said Harpreet.

It did look much too scary. I tried to ease the shark off the paper but the glue stuck fast. I tried pulling.

'Don't rip up your lovely picture!' said Harpreet. 'You'll spoil it.'

'I don't like the shark,' I said. 'I'm going to cover him up.'

I found a picture of some houses. I started cutting out a whole row of them, complete with little gardens. 'I'm going to have an underwater buried village,' I said.

I arranged it right along the bottom of the page, covering up every tooth and fin and scale. I put shells and seaweed hedges in the gardens and stuck anchors on the top of every roof as television aerials. I stuck and stuck until the bottom of my



picture was twice as thick as the top, but it didn't stop me worrying about the shark swimming silently in and out the windows and doors, looking for his family.

I dreamt about the shark at night. I couldn't get back to sleep, even though I huddled close to Mum.

I hated her being out so much. I put Kendall to bed about eight but I stayed up until Mum came home, even though she sometimes didn't make it back till midnight.

'You should go to sleep, Lola Rose, you silly girl,' Mum said, rubbing her finger under my eyes. 'Look at these dark circles. You look like a little panda. You're a bad bad girl.'

But she didn't get cross with me. She was always in a good mood now when she came home from the pub. It wasn't just the drinks her customers bought her. I was scared she might have started a thing with the manager, Barry. She seemed to be very thick with him, especially since they had a karaoke night and Mum sang a special Kylie medley.

'He said I'm every bit as good as Kylie – and he said my bum's just as good as hers too,' Mum said, dancing round the bedroom in her underwear.

'Mum!'

'He says he might give me a regular singing spot. He's got this mad idea that I could stand on top of the bar counter and prance round a bit.' Mum waggled her bum and held her hairbrush like a mike, demonstrating.



*'Mum!'*

'Your face, Lola Rose!' said Mum. 'Look, darling, if I've got a nice voice there's no reason why I shouldn't show it off.'

'It sounds like this Barry guy is more interested in your nice bum,' I said sourly.

'Ooh, you cheeky girl,' said Mum, pretending she was going to smack *my* bum with the hair-brush. 'Nah, old Barry's a sweetheart but he's too much under his wife's thumb. She doesn't mind the singing idea if it brings in more customers but she'll make sure Barry behaves himself. Not that I'd let him get anywhere. He's way too old and dull for me. I've got other fish to fry.'

Mum grinned at herself in the dressing-table mirror we'd bought at the weekend at a hospice shop.

My stomach squeezed. 'What do you mean, other fish to fry?' I said.

'It's just a silly expression, sweetheart. Take no notice,' said Mum, brushing her hair.

'Have you got a new boyfriend?'

'No! Well, not exactly. You can't call him a boyfriend. We've not even been out together. But he's interested, put it that way. Well, a number of the guys down the pub have chatted me up, as a matter of fact – but Jake's different.'

'Jake?'

'He is *gorgeous*, Lola Rose. He's an artist. He says he wants to paint my portrait. Imagine, I might find myself hanging in an art gallery one day! It's Jake who's the oil painting though. He's



got this thick dark-blond hair, quite long, as lovely as a girl's, but there's nothing girly about Jake, *oh no!*

My heart was beating so fast I felt dizzy. 'Mum, don't!' I was in such a panic I didn't think what I was saying. 'What if Dad finds out?'

Mum stared at me. 'Dad?' she said. She acted like she'd forgotten all about him. 'Your dad's got nothing to do with it, darling. He's in the past. Over and done with. We'll never see him again.'

'But...' I screwed up my face, struggling. I didn't know why I felt in such a panic. That's what I wanted to hear, wasn't it? *I* didn't want to see Dad. But it seemed so weird for Mum to talk about him as if he was an old film she could barely remember. Dad had always come first with her.

'Don't you love him any more?' I said, as Mum got into bed.

She wasn't listening properly, humming under her breath. 'You what? Do I love Jake? It's early days, darling, early days.'

'I said do you love *Dad!*'

'Shh! Don't shout, you'll wake Kendall. Why are you going on about your dad, for God's sake? Don't you remember what he was like? He's left me with lots of little mementoes – look.' Mum tapped the caps on her teeth.

'Yeah, I know, Mum. But that's just it. Why are you taking up with another guy when you've only just left Dad? Why can't you be happy with Kendall and me?'

'Oh grow up, Jayni – sorry, Lola Rose.'



'I *do* act grown up, you know I do,' I said, turning my back on her.

'Oooh, don't go in a huff, sweetheart.' Mum cuddled up to me.

I tried to pull away, stiff as a board. Mum tickled me until I squealed and doubled up.

'Shh, shh!' said Mum, though she was giggling too. She cuddled in quick and this time I didn't wriggle away. 'I just mean when you *are* grown up you'll understand. I love you and little Kenny with all my heart, darling – but I need a man too. Life isn't worth living if you don't have someone to make your heart flutter. You'll see when you're older.'

I was sure I wouldn't. My heart had done enough fluttering to last me a lifetime. I didn't think I'd ever want a man. Especially not the kind of guy my mum liked.

I hoped this Jake would fade out of sight as quickly as the footballer, but Mum started going out with him on her nights off. When she was working he stayed till closing time and then walked her home. He came into our flat sometimes. Whenever I heard two lots of footsteps I snapped the light off quick and pretended to be asleep.

I wasn't in any hurry to meet him. I was very glad we only had one bedroom, and Kendall and I were sprawled right across the only bed.

But then he came round on Sunday, Mum's day off. I should have suspected something. Mum got up early and showered and shampooed for ages. She got dressed in a new tiny turquoise top that



showed off her navel diamond and put on her tight white jeans. Usually on Sundays we had a long lie-in until eleven or twelve and then Mum just muddled around the house barefoot, a big cardie over her nightie.

But that Sunday Mum nagged at Kendall and me to get up bright and early. Well, it *was* early but we weren't feeling bright. I didn't want to get dressed in *my* new jeans. They were already uncomfortably tight around my tummy. I always seemed hungry now, especially in the evenings when Mum was out. I'd eat three bars of chocolate on the trot, or go on buttering slice after slice of bread until I'd polished off the whole loaf.

I wanted to stay in my nightie and sit up in bed and stick stuff in my scrapbook. Ms Balsam had given me lots of her magazines. I was having fun snipping out heads and bodies and arms and legs and making new people on my page. Sometimes I invented strange new species with six arms or car wheels for feet. I'd cut the heads off the skinniest fashion models and stick them onto enormous elephants and whales.

'Come on, Lola Rose, stop that sticking and get *washed*,' said Mum, snatching my scrapbook. She pulled a face. 'You're definitely sick, you! One warped, weird little kid. What's with the whale lady? Tell you what, she's a dead spit of your Auntie Barbara.' Mum giggled and adjusted her jeans over her own tiny hips.

Kendall wanted to stay in bed too. He was involved in a complicated game with George under



the covers, swimming in their own dark private ocean. Mum fished him out and carried him squealing to the bathroom.

'I want two clean, charming, well-dressed kids, *if* you don't mind,' she said.

'Why?' I whined. 'It's Sunday.'

'Exactly,' said Mum. 'It's Sunday. *Funday*. My Jake's coming round and we're all going out to have fun at Camden Lock market.'

Kendall and I were going to need some convincing. We got washed and dressed sullenly.

'For God's sake, smile!' said Mum, when Jake knocked on the door. She glanced at us anxiously. Especially me. It was as if she was suddenly noticing how big I was.

Jake came as a shock. He *was* good looking in a scruffy sort of way. His fair hair was longer than mine, tied back in a ponytail. But he was young. I'd imagined this big artist guy in his thirties. Jake was an art *student*.

'He's much younger than you, Mum,' I hissed in the ladies at Camden Lock.

'Not *that* much,' said Mum.

'How much?' I said. 'He's still at art college, isn't he?'

'Look, you're acting like he's still at school.'

'How old is he, Mum?'

'It doesn't *matter*. Now shut up and get a move on. I want to look round all the stalls. It's great here, isn't it? Jake told me all about it.'

When we came out of the ladies Jake and Kendall weren't there. We both stared at the wall



where we'd left them as if expecting them to rematerialize. The spot stayed empty.

I clutched Mum's hand.

'They'll be in the gents,' she said.

'Kendall wouldn't let any stranger take him to the toilet,' I said.

Kendall was weirdly private. He hollered if Mum or I happened to burst in when he was on the loo. He'd often hang on grimly rather than use a public toilet. Sometimes he didn't make it in time.

'Jake isn't a stranger,' Mum said crossly.

She walked over to the gents. I followed her. We waited a minute. I started to feel sick. I must have gone white because Mum nudged me.

'It's OK, Lola Rose. For God's sake, they're just having a pee.' She shouted through the door. 'Oi, Jake, Kendall, get a move on in there! Lola Rose is getting worried.'

No one answered. Mum swallowed, pulling her white jacket higher round her neck.

'Jake? Kendall?' she shouted.

A strange man came out of the toilet, grinning stupidly. 'You lost someone, darling?'

'It's OK, it's just my boyfriend and my little boy. Maybe he's had a bit of an accident?'

'There's no one in there, pet.'

'What, not even in the cubicle?'

'There's only one and I've just come out of it.'

'Oh God,' said Mum. She looked at me. She chewed on her finger. 'Well, they've obviously gone for a little wander round. Boys!' she said, trying to sound jaunty. She gave me another nudge



because I was crying. 'Stop it! Kendall will be fine. He's with Jake.'

'We don't *know* Jake, not properly. And what if Dad tracked us down and saw them together? Maybe *he's* got Kenny?'

'Oh my God, they've killed Kenny,' said the toilet guy, quoting *South Park*.

'Shut it, mate,' said Mum. She pulled me away.

'What are we going to do?' I looked at the heaving crowds in the market. 'How are we going to find them?'

'We *will*. Just shut up.'

'We shouldn't have left Kenny with Jake. Why did we have to go out with him anyway? He's not part of our family.'

'He could be one day,' said Mum. 'Don't look at me like that. And *you* were the one whining on about needing to go to the ladies.'

It was so awful thinking it was my fault. 'Kenny!' I yelled.

I rushed down the first little alleyway between the stalls. 'Kenny, where are you? *Kenny!*'

'I'm Kendall,' he said, bobbing up out of nowhere, laughing at me. 'Look what we've got, Lola Rose. Pancakes! Yummy yum.'

'Jammy crepes,' said Jake. 'Kendall chose the jams. He's got blackcurrant for you, Lola Rose, because he says you like purple.'

I love pancakes. I love blackcurrant jam. But my stomach was so stirred up, it was like swallowing an old sock. I only ate a mouthful and then threw it away.



Mum glared at me. 'You mean little cow,' she hissed. 'It was sweet of him to buy us pancakes. He hasn't got much money, Lola Rose, seeing he's a student. You could at least act like you're grateful. You're showing me up. At least *Kendall's* behaving beautifully.'

That made me feel sicker than ever. Kendall was usually so shy and strange with anyone new. But now he was holding Jake's free hand, skipping along happily, George carefully tucked under his armpit. He was babbling non-stop, most of it nonsense, some me-and-George saga. Jake wasn't even *listening*, but every time he gave a little grunt Kendall's face lit up delightedly.

Jake's other hand was holding Mum's.

I wanted them to look ridiculous as a couple.

They looked great together. Mum seemed so different when she was around Jake. When she was near Dad Mum was always twitching, scared because the slightest thing could set him off. She was always glancing anxiously at him. She never dared look at anyone else. Dad went berserk if he thought she was eyeing up any other men.

But now Mum mucked about and giggled and sang little snatches of song. Heaps of men turned to look at her. Some of them said stuff. Mum waved and blew them kisses. Jake grinned and waved too. His new silver bangle slid up his slim arm when he waved.

It was a present. Mum bought it for him. She bought me some sparkly stud earrings that looked like real diamonds. She bought Kendall a real



wristwatch even though he can't tell the time yet. She bought herself a moonstone pendant. She got Jake to fasten it round her neck as if *he'd* bought it for her.

'Aren't moonstones meant to be unlucky?' he said.

'Not on me. I'm Lady Luck,' said Mum. 'Don't you like it?'

'It's pretty, very pretty. *You're* pretty,' said Jake. He kissed her neck where he'd fastened the clasp.

'Um! Look at Mum and Jake, they're *kissing*,' said Kendall.

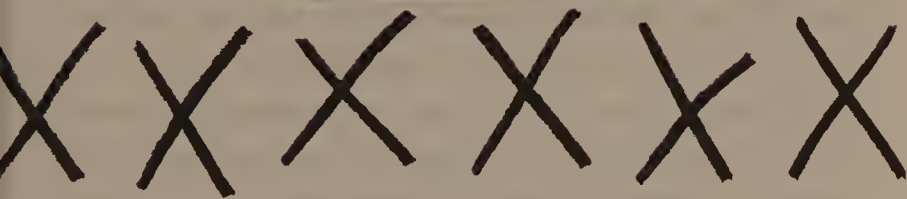
It was obvious what was going to happen next.



# Ten



## Love and Kisses



‘Maybe it would be a good idea to rearrange the flat a bit,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve been thinking. You and Kendall might like your own den, more of a play space. So how about us turning the bedroom into *your* room. It’s purple too, your favourite colour.’

‘Lilac isn’t purple.’

‘It’s *light* purple, Miss Picky. Anyway, I was thinking of getting a little portable telly for you two. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Then the living room could be more – well, my room.’

‘And you want to put a socking great bed in it for you and Jake,’ I said coldly.



'No I don't! Well. I was thinking about one of them sofa beds. Then if Jake should want to stay over ...'

'Why can't he stay in his own place?'

'He hasn't exactly *got* his own place,' said Mum. 'He's staying with a friend at the moment.'

'Why can't he *get* his own place, then?' I said.

'Because he hasn't got any money. He's a student.'

'They give them rooms in the university, don't they?'

'Only the first year. For God's sake, Lola Rose, give it a rest. He's coming to live with us and that's that. I don't see why you've got such a problem with it. We're in love, can't you see?'

'He doesn't love you. He's just shacking up with us because he hasn't got anywhere else. And you spend a fortune on him. *Our* fortune.'

Mum slapped me straight across the face. Kendall was watching. He cried. I didn't cry. I stared Mum out.

'You only slapped me because you know it's true.'

'I slapped you because you're a spoilt little cow,' Mum snapped. 'What's the matter with you, Lola Rose? You can't be jealous, can you?'

'What, jealous of Jake?' I folded my arms. She was asking for it. 'Well, he is more my age than yours.'

I stepped back smartly in case she tried another slap.

She was meaner than that.



'Don't kid yourself *you'll* ever get a man like Jake,' she said, looking me up and down.

I didn't want her to see me cry. I slammed straight out of the house and down the path. I hoped she'd yell after me to come back but she didn't. So I went on walking, though I didn't really know where I was going.

I knew my way to school, I knew my way to the chippy and the Chinese, I knew my way to Mum's pub, I knew my way to the video shop. And I knew my way to Harpreet's house.

I could go and see Harpreet. She was my best friend now. We had our own special handshake and we each wore half of a Friends Forever locket. We told each other all sorts of secrets. We had very long whispered conversations about sex and often ended up giggling helplessly. But I didn't want to tell her about Mum and Jake. It was the one thing I couldn't talk about. My family.

Harpreet talked about her family all the time. She quarrelled with her brothers and sisters sometimes and she argued a little bit with her mum and dad, but they never had a proper *row*. They never ever hit each other.

I wished I'd been born part of Harpreet's family. I wished Harpreet's dad was *my* dad. I loved the way he put his arm round Harpreet and cuddled her close and called her his little girl. My dad had done all that with me. He called me all sorts of special things when he was in a good mood. I was his Princess Rosycheeks, his Fairy Doll, his Jay-Jay Jam Doughnut. But the good mood could



change to bad, and then he'd call me other stuff, short, sharp, ugly words that stuck to me like slime.

I couldn't imagine Harpreet's dad turning like that. I asked her once to tell me the very worst thing he'd ever done to her. She thought and thought and then said he'd shouted at her when she was little because she'd run into the road. She'd cried and then *he* cried and gave her a great big hug.

Harpreet laughed and said he was a silly softie old dad, though he could be horribly strict about bedtimes and it didn't look like he was ever going to let her have a boyfriend. It seemed to me he was the best dad in the world.

I wasn't so sure about Harpreet's mum. She wasn't really pretty, though she had beautiful big eyes with long eyelashes. She had a way of rolling her eyes and sighing that made me nervous.

She seemed to be quite friendly with my mum, but she rolled her eyes expressively afterwards. I don't think she liked it that my mum got on very well with Harpreet's dad. She never *said* anything but she didn't need to. She just looked at my mum's hair or her tight top or her short skirt, she listened to my mum's giggle and her tales of what went on down the pub – and those eyes rolled like marbles.

I'd hoped I'd grow up little and pretty like Mum. I'd so hoped it might happen when I turned into Lola Rose. But now I wondered how I'd kidded



myself. Mum had made it obvious. I wasn't ever going to look like her.

I'd end up like Auntie Barbara instead.

I walked straight past Harpreet's house. I walked faster and faster, as if I was trying to run away from myself. I wasn't even sure who I was any more. I couldn't believe how quickly Mum had settled into this new life. How could she fall in and out of love so easily? She acted like all those corny old love songs she sang, changing as quickly as a jukebox. She stood by her man but he was so cruel so it was all over and she did her crying in the rain and she would survive but then she met this stranger and then it was passionate kisses.

I thought of Mum and Jake kissing.

Then I heard kissing noises behind me. Loud, slurpy, silly lip-smacking.

It was a gang of boys hanging about outside the video shop. I knew one of them, a horrible boy called Peter who was in my class at school. He kept trying to pull all the girls' skirts up. He had a very pink face and big nostrils in a flat nose. Harpreet and I called him Peter Piglet.

'Give us a kiss then, Lola Rose,' he called.

I pulled a face at him. 'Get lost, Peter Piglet,' I said fiercely.

Peter went pinker than ever. The other boys laughed, and made more kissing noises. They were mostly older than Peter. That Ross was with them. He was famous in Flexley Park. All the girls fancied him. He was only thirteen but he got sixteen-year-old girls wanting to go out with him.



He was looking at me too. 'Yeah, fancy a snog, Lola Rose?' he said.

I didn't know if he was joking or not. The other boys were still making kissing noises.

I hurtled down the street away from them. I ran and ran away from their raucous laughter. I tripped and fell over and they laughed more. I tore the knees of my new jeans and got the sleeves of my beautiful furry jacket dirty.

I was sobbing by the time I got home. I wanted to make it up with Mum and have a cuddle with her – but Jake was there.

'Where've you *been*, Lola Rose? Don't you dare flounce off like that! I've been dead worried about you. Are you crying?'

'No!'

I tried to go into the bedroom but she caught hold of me.

'What's up with you? Look at the state of you! Your new jeans! And your jacket – look at the cuffs, they're filthy!'

I cried more then, but Mum rubbed at it with a damp tea cloth and cleaned up both cuffs. The jeans were so badly ripped at the knees she said she couldn't sew them.

'Maybe I can,' said Jake.

I thought he was joking, but he cut up an old flowery shirt he said he didn't want any more and made appliquéd flower patches on both knees.

'Wow,' said Mum, ruffling Jake's hair. 'You're a man of many talents.'

'Men don't sew,' said Kendall.



'He's a man, all right,' said Mum, kissing Jake. 'That's brilliant! Will you do mine too, darling? Lola Rose, don't you just love your new jeans! What do you say to Jake?'

'Thanks,' I said, as if he'd simply passed me the cornflakes. But I was secretly thrilled. I watched carefully to see how he did the appliqué stitch.

'I'll show you how to do it,' said Jake.

'It's OK,' I said, shrugging. I'd already worked it out.

I was determined not to be won over. I didn't see why Jake and I had to bond like Superglue just because Mum was nuts about him. She kept nagging at me to show him my scrapbook. I caught her lugging it out of the bedroom to show him herself. I flew at her and tugged it out of her arms.

'It's private!' I shouted.

'Ooh, what you got in there, then, Lola Rose? You been sticking in mucky pictures?'

The edge of my scrapbook had got bumped and the spine was torn a little in the struggle. I was furious.

'You're the only one who let guys take mucky pictures!' I said.

Mum went fiery red, even flushing down her neck. 'I never!' she shouted, like a little girl.

'Mucky pictures?' said Jake. 'Oh Victoria, you bad girl!'

'They weren't *mucky*,' Mum protested. She gave me a shove. 'I did some modelling once, that's all. Glamour pics.'



'Glamour!' said Jake, wiggling his eyebrows. 'Oh, show me, show me!'

'They were in these mags ages ago. I threw them all out,' Mum said quickly. She sighed, looking at Kendall and me. 'When I was young, before the kids ruined my figure.'

'I think it's gorgeous,' said Jake.

Mum beamed and nodded her head at me, as if to say, *So there!*

'Why can't you be happy for me?' she hissed in bed that night.

It looked like it was going to be the last night we were all tucked up together, Mum and Kendall and me. Jake had gone back to his mate's flat to gather his stuff together and have a few drinks. He was moving in with us tomorrow.

I didn't reply. I pretended to be asleep, but Mum pulled me over onto her lap.

'Do you really hate Jake?' she asked.

'He's OK.'

'Oh come on, he's flipping gorgeous! And he's so kind too. That's what I can't get over. Never loses his rag, never acts jealous. I thought you'd really landed me in it, going on about my glamour photos, but look how lovely he was. He's a man in a million, Lola Rose.'

'You've only known him five minutes, Mum.'

'I feel like I've known him all my life. The moment I set eyes on him I knew. We clicked, just like that.'

'You clicked with Dad. You clicked with the footballer. You click with any guy that's going,' I mumbled into the pillow.



Mum heard me. 'I'll click you right out of this bed if you don't shut up,' she said.

But she couldn't shut up herself.

'I couldn't wish for a sweeter guy. I never dreamt I could be so lucky. I'm getting on a bit now, I've got you two kids, my boobs are getting all saggy—'

'You're nuts,' I said.

'No, really.' She sat up in bed and stuck her chest out, feeling herself. 'Oh God, they *are*! I wonder how much a boob implant is. A thousand? More? I could afford it now!'

I snorted.

'What's your problem? It's *my* money and I've spent a fortune on you two.'

'And Jake,' I said. 'I bet he didn't buy his new cowboy boots himself. Or that new mobile. Or his new Walkman. Or that big set of oil paints.'

'He's an artist for God's sake.' Mum peered down at her breasts. 'Maybe I'd better have that implant if he's going to do a nude portrait of me. Do you think it hurts terribly? Would they have to cut you right open?'

'Oh no, of course not! They just unbutton your boobs, pop in the implant, and Bob's your uncle,' I said sarcastically. 'You're so stupid, Mum. Of course they cut you open. They cut right along underneath and then—'

'OK, don't go on about it,' said Mum. 'Maybe I'll put up with my boobs the way they are. Jake doesn't seem to have any complaints. That's what I mean, Lola Rose. He's so good to me. You



don't think I was better off with your dad, do you?'

'I think you'd be better off without any bloke,' I said.

'You're starting to sound just like your Auntie Barbara,' said Mum. 'Watch out you don't start to look like her too!' She started poking my tummy. 'Ooh yes, podgy-wodgy!'

'Give over!' I said. 'You stop that, saggy-baggy!'

We tickled and poked, squealing with laughter. Kendall woke up and joined in. We had a wrestling match until Kendall fell right out of bed with a thump and the old lady downstairs started banging on her ceiling.

We hauled Kendall back into bed and then the three of us cuddled up close. We went to sleep just like that. I didn't even have the shark dream.



**Eleven**



## **Lipstick and High Heels**

Jake moved in with us. Mum turned the living room into their room. She bought them a brand-new sofa bed. No community stores shabby old stuff this time. Mum bought a computer too. She pretended it was a present for Kendall and me. But it was Jake who sat at it all evening, playing games, while Mum was out working at the pub.

Kendall liked to loll against him. Sometimes Jake let him have a go.

‘What about you, Lola Rose?’

‘No thanks, it’s boring,’ I said.

I shut myself in my bedroom with my scrap



book. Mum had bought me a big pile of birthday cards, lovely flowers and seascapes and sunsets and rainbows and fairy princess ladies with very long curly hair. They were brand-new birthday cards specially for me to cut up and stick in my scrapbook.

She bought them to stop me nagging her about the money. I'd found the envelope with the lottery winnings hidden under her tights. I'd peeped inside and panicked. There was hardly anything left. A fistful of five-pound notes. That was *all*.

I knelt there, Mum's tights squiggled all around me like black snakes. I felt so scared.

I stayed up and tackled Mum about it when she got back from the pub.

'Shut up, Lola Rose!' she said. She didn't want Jake to hear. 'How dare you nose round my things!' she hissed in my ear. 'It's *my* money anyway. It was my lottery ticket.'

'It's not anyone's money now. It's all gone.'

'Gone on lovely things for all of us,' said Mum. 'Now go to your bedroom this minute, you ungrateful little whatsit.'

I stormed off furiously. How could Mum be so stupid? What if she lost her job and couldn't get another? What if Jake started getting drunk and hitting her and we had to do another runner? The lottery money had made me feel so much safer.

I decided I wasn't speaking to Mum any more. But then she bought me the birthday cards and I couldn't stay cross. I spent hours cutting out and arranging and sticking. I wore a little groove at the



side of my middle finger through gripping the scissors.

Kendall teased me because my mouth opened and shut as I snipped. 'Like a fish,' he said, and he made George attack me hungrily.

I was so startled I snipped straight through my favourite fairy princess. I made a great fuss and Kendall cried. I decided I didn't care. I found an African plains picture of giraffes and started creating a tribe of strange giraffe-girls, their abundant hair tumbling down their long spotted necks.

I called to Kendall, offering to tell him a giraffe-girl fairy story.

'I'm busy,' he shouted back triumphantly. 'I'm playing on the computer with Jake.'

I whispered bad swear words. Kendall liked being with Jake much more than being with me. So did Mum. They didn't seem to need me much any more.

I snipped snipped snipped at my magazine, playing guillotines. Heads tumbled into my lap. I crumpled them all together and threw them into the far corner of the room.

Well, *I* didn't need *them*.

I didn't need anyone. I was Lola Rose.

I just wished I *looked* more like my idea of Lola Rose.

I mooned in front of the mirror, experimenting with ways of doing my hair. I hunched my shoulders right up under my ears so that my hair seemed longer. I tugged at it, encouraging it to grow. Maybe next month, or the month after, or



the one after *that*, it would have grown right down my back, fairy princess style.

I stole into the bathroom and squirted it with Mum's hairspray. Mum was so lucky having such thick hair. I could grow mine right down to the ground but it would always stay thin and wispy. It lay limp against my head now no matter how I tried to fluff it up.

I gave up on my hair and tried my face. I'd mucked about with make-up before, putting glitter on my eyelids and gloss on my lips, but I'd always wiped it off when Dad was due home. He said he didn't like to see his little girl all tarted up.

I could paint on make-up an inch thick now. I went crazy with Mum's make-up. I started properly with foundation and then pencilled in my eyebrows and smeared smoky grey on my eyelids. I outlined them with black pen, making it thicker whenever I wobbled. I put on two thick coats of mascara so I saw black fringe curtains every time I looked up.

Then I applied rouge on both cheeks. I knew you were supposed to follow the lines on your cheekbones, but my cheeks were so podgy I couldn't *find* my bones. At least I could see my lips. I attempted that special putting-on-lipstick smile but I got red all over my teeth, so I invented my own method, going slightly over the edge of my lips to make them look more voluptuous.

I hoped I looked much older. Twelve, fourteen, sixteen? I peeped in Mum's wardrobe and put on her high heels. We took nearly the same size now.



I stuffed the ends of the shoes with tissues. I stuck more tissues inside one of her bras so that I had an impressive bust when I pulled on my tightest T-shirt.

Jake and Kendall stared at me when I strutted into the living room.

‘My goodness, Lola Rose,’ said Jake.

‘She looks silly,’ said Kendall.

‘You *are* silly,’ I said. ‘I’m going out.’

‘Hang on,’ said Jake. ‘Are you allowed out by yourself?’

‘I’m not going to *be* by myself. I’m meeting someone. Like a date.’

‘Oh no you’re not,’ said Jake.

‘Oh yes I am,’ I said rushing to the front door.

Jake called to me to come back.

‘You can’t tell me what to do,’ I shouted. ‘You’re not my dad.’

I met Steve and Andy down the road, coming back from a shopping trip, laden with Marks and Sparks carrier bags. Well, Andy was laden, two bags in either hand. Steve was swanning along carrying a plant pot. He raised his eyebrows at me and walked on, jasmine trailing decoratively down his arms. Andy stopped and balanced his shopping bags on the pavement. He mimed great delight to see me, clutching his heart.

‘Why it’s Lola Rose, looking *gorgeous*!’

‘Hi, Andy,’ I said. I tried to make my voice sound husky and provocative but it just sounded like I had a cold.

‘Hi, Lola Rose,’ he said, his own voice as gruff as



he could get. I laughed, even though he was taking the mickey.

I walked on down the road, though my ankles kept twisting in Mum's high heels. I decided to go round to Harpreet's house and show them off to her. I knocked at her door. I rang the bell too, in case they hadn't heard.

'Shh!' said Harpreet, opening the door. 'My dad's having a nap.' Then she looked at me properly. '*Lola Rose!*'

'Can I come and play?'

'Yeah. Well. For a bit. My mum's cooking our dinner.'

The wonderful hot savoury smell of it made my mouth water. I hoped I might get invited to share it. Harpreet took me into their front room. Her little sister Amandeep was sitting cross-legged in a corner, muttering to her Barbie dolls. Her big brother Amrit was hunched over the computer. He nodded in my direction without taking his eyes off the screen.

'Can I try your shoes on, Lola Rose?' Harpreet begged.

'Sure,' I said, slipping them off.

Harpreet wobbled around, roaring with laughter every step.

'Look, why don't you kids play shoe shops in another room?' said Amrit, sighing. Then he looked up and saw me. He stayed looking. He started telling me about the work he was doing on the computer. Then he went on about his football team at school. Then he started bragging about



this band he and his mates had started up. He was the drummer. He didn't have his own drum kit but he started beating out the rhythm on the wall.

'Shut *up*, Amrit, you'll wake Dad,' said Harpreet.

'Dad's already awake,' said Mr Gabriele, coming into the room in his socks. He yawned. His mouth stayed open when he saw me.

'Good gracious, Lola Rose! No, it's not Lola Rose at all, silly me, she's just a little girl. You're her big sister. Good afternoon, Miss Luck, I'm delighted to meet you.'

I knew he was just kidding around, but it was fun, and Harpreet and Amandeep giggled. Amrit looked irritated.

'What's all this noise? Have you naughty children woken your poor father?' said Mrs Gabriele, putting her head round the door.

Her eyes rolled when she saw me. 'Does your mother know you're out like that, Lola Rose?' she said.

'This isn't Lola Rose, this is Lola Rose's beautiful big sister,' said Harpreet's dad. 'May I offer you a sherry, Miss Luck? Would you care for a cigarette?'

'Don't encourage her,' said Mrs Gabriele crossly. 'You'd better go home and wash your face, Lola Rose. Take those shoes off at once, Harpreet, and give them back to Lola Rose. Hurry up now, dinner's nearly ready.'

'Can Lola Rose stay for dinner?' Harpreet asked.

I looked at Mr Gabriele hopefully, but his eyes swivelled to his wife.



'I'm sorry, dear,' she said insincerely. 'There isn't enough for another person.'

'Lola Rose can eat mine. I'll be having a pizza with my mates later,' said Amrit.

I smiled at him with my shiny red lips, but Mrs Gabriele wouldn't relent.

'Nonsense,' she snapped. 'Lola Rose is going home for her own dinner now.' She looked at me beadily. 'You've got lipstick on your front teeth!'

I wanted to bite her with my stained teeth. I shrugged instead, pretending it was a totally cool new fashion to have bright red teeth. I stalked out of their house. I tripped going down their front path. I hoped they weren't watching.

My feet were hurting in Mum's shoes. It felt like I was getting a blister. Several. I knew I should go home but I'd only been gone half an hour. I'd never be able to convince Jake I'd had a real date.

I couldn't convince myself. I could call myself Lola Rose until the cows came home but I was still stuck being shy, soft old Jayni. I was never going to get pretty and sparky and sexy like Mum. I was going to get bigger and blobbier and end up like Auntie Barbara, just as Mum said. Poor elephantine Auntie Barbara who was so wibbly wobbly that no man would ever want her.

Maybe no man would ever want me. Amrit had acted like he was chatting me up, but maybe he was just having a laugh at me.

The gang of boys were hanging around outside the video shop again. Ross was there. Peter Piglet too. I knew I should run away quickly.



I didn't run. I walked towards them.

They started making the kissing noises again but I smiled this time. I walked right up to them, wobbling on Mum's high heels.

'You look daft in them shoes,' said Peter, his pink nostrils going in and out as he breathed heavily.

'You *are* daft, in shoes or out of them,' I said. I tried to sweep past him, but tripped.

'Whoopsie,' said Ross, and he clutched my arm to steady me.

He wasn't quite so good looking when you got close to him. His eyes were a little too close and his lips were too thin. I wasn't sure I wanted him hanging onto my arm. I tried to pull away.

'It's OK, I'm just helping you,' he said. 'It's Lola Rose, isn't it?

A tall boy in a torn T-shirt grinned. 'Lola Rose sat on a pin. Lola rose!'

It wasn't funny but they all fell about laughing. I knew they were laughing at me – but I grinned too.

'So you're in Pete's class?' said Ross. 'You look older than him.'

'I *act* older,' I said, tossing my hair.

He still had his hand on my arm. He wasn't gripping tight but his fingers felt weird on my skin. I wasn't sure if I liked it or not. He was obviously the boss guy of the gang. He was the best looking. He was the one all the girls fancied.

He was peering at me, head on one side. 'Where are you off to then, Lola Rose?' he asked.

I liked the way he kept saying my name. I loved



being reminded I was this new glamorous girl. She was so much more grown up than silly old Jayni.

I smiled back at Ross. 'Nowhere special,' I said casually.

'So hang out with us,' said Ross.

'OK,' I said, as if I couldn't really be bothered. I was fizzing inside. I wondered where we'd go. I hoped it might be McDonald's. I was starving hungry.

Ross didn't seem to be thinking about food. 'We'll go down the park,' he said, still smiling.

All the boys sniggered.

I took no notice. Ross was still smiling straight at me. His eyes were very blue with black lashes, and he had lovely smooth, rosy skin. He was big too, with muscles like he worked out. He could get any girl he wanted. He seemed to want *me*!

Ross and his mates strode off towards this park. I trotted along behind them, finding it hard to keep up in Mum's heels. Piglet Pete hung back, keeping pace with me.

I didn't want to be stuck with him. I wanted it to be a fairy tale. I looked almost pretty now I was Lola Rose. Maybe Ross wanted me to be his girlfriend. 'Push off, Pete,' I said.

'OK,' he said, shrugging. He ran ahead and joined the others.

'Hey, Lola Rose!' Ross called, peering back at me. 'Come on!' He beckoned with his finger, making little kissing encouraging noises.

The boys all laughed. I didn't like the way Ross was acting. He wasn't treating me like I was



a girl. He was calling to me like I was his little dog.  
I still followed him.

It wasn't a proper park, just a scrubby patch of grass and a tangle of bushes used as a rubbish dump. There was some woman walking her dogs way in the distance and an old man mumbling to himself, clutching a beer can. And all the boys, making stupid noises.

I wanted it to be just Ross and me in a beautiful big green park. We'd walk hand in hand and he'd be looking at me with those big blue eyes and whisper lovely things. But this was all so different. I was stuck by the bushes with all these boys and I didn't like it.

'It's getting late. I have to go home now,' I said.

'No you don't, Lola Rose. Come here!'

Ross bent his head and kissed me, right in front of the others. It wasn't gentle and loving, like he cared. He was just showing off. I struggled to get free but he held me tight. I twisted my head away and started yelling.

'Shut up, you idiot!' said Ross.

I wouldn't shut up. I shouted.

'Let that girl go!' someone called.

Ross hung onto me, but some of the others started running. A dog started barking furiously, getting nearer. Two dogs, leaping up at all of us, huge Alsations.

Everyone was running now. I tried to run too, but I fell in my shoes. I huddled there on the grass, the dogs barking in my face, showing their sharp teeth. I started screaming.



‘It’s all right, Lola Rose! They won’t hurt you. They just like to make a lot of noise – like me!’

I peered up past the two dogs. Ms Balsam was standing over me!

‘Down, Bealey, down, Buss, down, girls! Stop barking, you’re giving us both a headache. Give your paws to Lola Rose and show her you want to be friends!’

The two dogs quietened. They sat up on their back legs and politely offered me their paws. I took each one gingerly, giving it a tiny shake.

‘There!’ said Ms Balsam. ‘See, I can control my dogs far better than I can control all you kids.’

‘Hello . . . Bealey?’ I said, patting the dog’s head.

‘This one’s Miss Beale and this one’s Miss Buss. They were amazing women who ran a school for girls in Victorian times. I called my dogs after them. I’ve had them since they were six weeks old. They’re getting on a bit now but they can still make an impressive amount of noise. They scared off all the boys satisfactorily, didn’t they? So what was going on, Lola Rose?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ I mumbled. I slipped Mum’s shoes on and struggled to stand up.

Mrs Balsam put her hands under my elbows and hauled me upright. ‘Are those your friends?’

‘Sort of.’

‘I know the big lad, Ross. I used to teach him. He was a real handful. Do you like him?’

‘No,’ I said, wiping my lips with the back of my hand.

‘Here.’ She fished in her pocket and found me a



tissue. 'You're all smudged. Have a good wipe. Good god, you've got half of Boots' make-up counter all over your face. Don't you dare turn up at school like that. *Or* in those shoes. How do you *walk* in them?'

'I can't, not properly. They're my mum's.'

'Doesn't she mind you borrowing her shoes?'

'Well, she doesn't exactly know.'

'Maybe you should scoot off home quick and put them back in her wardrobe. So, Mum's out then?'

'Yeah, she works at the Coach and Horses.'

'So is there anyone at home to look after you and Kendall?'

'Oh yes,' I said quickly. 'We've got Jake.'

'He's your babysitter?'

'Well, he's like Mum's boyfriend.'

'And you get on all right?' she asked, as we walked towards the park gates, Miss Beale and Miss Buss bounding after us.

I shrugged. 'He's OK, I suppose.'

'Did he say you could come out tonight?'

'I told him I had like a date.'

'With *Ross*?'

'No! I just met up with him and those others. And he asked me to come down the park.'

'Did you think that was a good idea?' said Ms Balsam.

'Yes. No. Well, I didn't know they'd start messing about like that.'

'A smart girl like you?'

'Well, I suppose I went a little bit nuts because it was Ross. I mean, he's so good looking and that. It



made me feel really special, like I was somebody.'

Ms Balsam stopped walking. She put her hands gently on my shoulders. She looked straight into my eyes. 'You *are* somebody, Lola Rose. You're a very special, clever, creative girl, and very mature for your age too. I'm very impressed with the way you look after Kendall. He's OK, is he?'

'Yes, he likes being with Jake. They play computer games all the time.'

'So do you feel a bit left out sometimes?'

'No. Well. Sometimes, yeah.'

'Lola Rose, I don't want to pry. I know there's probably a lot of stuff you don't want to talk about. But if ever you feel like a little chat you know you can always come and find me at school.'

'Yes, I know. Thank you, Ms Balsam.'

She gave me a lift home in her car, me in the front, Miss Beale and Miss Buss barking like mad in the back.

Ms Balsam nodded at me when I got out of the car. 'See you in school tomorrow. I saw Peter's in Ross's little gang. Do you want me to have a stern word with him?'

'Better not.'

'If you're really keen on getting a boyfriend wouldn't Peter be a better bet than Ross?'

'No fear!'

Ms Balsam chuckled. 'Oh dear. But I take your point. Bye for now then, Lola Rose. I hope you won't get into trouble for coming back late.'

'I'll be fine,' I said.



# Twelve



## A Baby?

Kendall was still up when I got back even though it was way past his bedtime. It was way past mine too.

‘Don’t you *ever* go off like that again,’ Jake said. ‘Kendall’s been crying for you.’

‘No I haven’t,’ said Kendall, hitting him on the head with George. ‘I don’t want stupid old Lola Rose. I can’t stick her.’

‘Is that true?’ I said. ‘Can’t we have a cuddle then?’

Kendall shook his head but I picked him up anyway. He feebly punched me to prove his point and then snuggled into me.



'Bedtime,' I said, nuzzling his soft, feathery hair.

'I'm not a bit tired,' Kendall said, yawning.

'I am,' said Jake. 'I reckon I've read *Thomas the Tank Engine* at least two hundred times.'

I got Kendall into bed. He went to sleep in seconds. Then I sidled back to Jake.

'Are you going to tell Mum I dressed up in her stuff and went out?'

'I should do. But I'm not going to.'

'Thanks!'

'I'm just saving my own skin. She'd be mad at me for letting you. Lola Rose, have you *really* got a boyfriend?'

'Well, I know these boys. But the one I liked didn't turn out very nice so I probably won't be seeing him again.'

'Maybe that's just as well.'

'Maybe it is.' I hesitated. 'Jake, you know you did the flowers on my jeans? Could you do flowers on my denim jacket too, on the pockets, like? Maybe pink, to match the furry bit?'

'Sure. If you're a good girl.'

'I will be now.' I didn't kiss him goodnight because I wasn't a little kid like Kendall, but I waved my fingers at him and he waved both hands back to me.

'Jake's OK really,' I whispered to Kendall when I cuddled up to him in bed.

'I know that,' Kendall mumbles. I thought he'd gone back to sleep but then he suddenly said, 'Is he better than Dad?'

'He's better for us,' I said.



Jake didn't tell tales to Mum but she found out anyway. I'd got her top a little bit dirty and torn one of the little rubber tips off her high heels.

'You've been wearing my clothes, you little whatsit!' she said the next morning, slapping at me with the crumpled top.

She was in a very bad mood. I'd heard her arguing with Jake in the middle of the night. I got scared though there wasn't a real fight.

'I just felt like playing at dressing up,' I said quickly.

'You went out all dressed up too, didn't you? Don't lie to me, Lola Rose. There's mud all over my best shoes, you stupid little cow. How dare you sneak off like that? What were you up to? You might be able to wind Jake round your little finger but it won't wash with me. I'm not having you going out by yourself like that. Or *were* you by yourself? You weren't going with boys, were you?'

'I went for a walk in the park with Ms Balsam,' I said.

Jake stared at me but didn't say a word. Mum said plenty.

'What was she asking you, eh? I bet she wondered what you were doing, out by yourself, teetering about like a little trollop in my high heels. Oh God, Lola Rose, you've dropped me in it now.'

'No I haven't, Mum. She's ever so nice. She says I'm special.'



‘Special needs, more like, gabbing away to that nosy old bag.’

‘She’s not nosy. You’ve got her all wrong, Mum. She’s just friendly.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Mum. ‘Now listen here, Lola Rose. You keep right out of her way. Don’t let her worm anything out of you, OK? Else you’ll be put into care as quick as a wink – and Kendall too.’

‘I don’t want to be put into care,’ Kendall wailed. He didn’t know what ‘care’ was but he spilled corn-flakes all down his T-shirt in his anguish.

‘There. Now look what you’ve made him do!’ said Mum. ‘And we’re late for school as it is. Come on, mucky pup, let’s get you shifted.’

‘Lola Rose can change him and take him to school,’ said Jake. ‘We’re going to the doctor’s, Vic.’

Mum went red in the face. ‘*You* might be going to the doctor’s, matie. I’m certainly not going to waste my time sitting in some dismal surgery breathing in everyone’s germs. Come here, Kendall.’

My heart was thudding. ‘What’s the matter, Mum? Are you ill?’

‘Of course I’m not ill. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with me,’ she insisted.

‘Victoria,’ said Jake.

‘Shut *up*, will you,’ said Mum.

I kept on at her but she wouldn’t tell me anything. I did as Jake said and took Kendall to school. I kept worrying about it all morning.

‘What’s up, Lola Rose?’ said Harpreet at lunch



time. 'You're not in a huff with me, are you? Is it because my mum wouldn't let you stay for dinner? She's a bit funny like that. I'm ever so sorry.'

'It's not your mum I'm worrying about, Harpreet. It's mine,' I said. I stopped eating my half of Harpreet's banana. 'Jake was nagging at her to go to the doctor's this morning. They wouldn't tell me why. Mum kept saying she wasn't ill but why else would she need to go?'

'I know!' said Harpreet. 'She could be having a baby!'

I stared at her.

'Don't look so gobsmacked. Your mum could be having Jake's baby, right?'

'I-I suppose so,' I said. 'Though I don't think she wants any more children.'

'These things happen,' said Harpreet, in a very worldly-wise way.

I tried to get my head round the idea of a baby. I pictured this little squirmy pink creature with Jake's long hair falling right down to its toes. Maybe I could brush it and plait it and play hair-dressers. Kendall wouldn't always let me pick him up and baby him nowadays. Maybe it would be fun to have a real baby to play with. Mum didn't have much patience with babies. I could look after it for her and pretend it was mine.

I gobbled up the rest of the banana and then got stuck into my six squares of Cadbury's chocolate. I stroked the wrapping paper. Maybe we could dress the baby in purple? I could get Jake to help me make little purple dungarees with



red flowers on the pockets. The baby could have a tiny purple teddy to match . . .

I spent the afternoon designing baby outfits on the back of my school jotter. I went arm in arm with Harpreet to pick up Kendall and Amandeep from their after-school club. We talked babies all the way home.

'Who's going to have a baby?' Kendall asked.

'Mum. Well, maybe she is. Harpreet thinks so,' I said.

'Mum!' said Kendall, astounded. 'She's not! She hasn't got a big tummy.'

'Not yet. It'll grow.'

'Is *our* mum going to have a baby?' said Amandeep. '*She's* got a big tummy.'

'I know, but she's just fat. I hope *I* don't get fat like her when I'm grown up,' said Harpreet, rubbing her hands up and down her skinny hips. 'My sister's getting a bit fat around the tummy. If *she's* pregnant our whole family will go bananas.'

'I don't want Mum to have a baby,' said Kendall.

'Yes you do. You like playing babies in the playhouse. I could show you how to bath the baby and feed it and change its nappy,' I offered.

'I don't want to change pooey nappies!' said Kendall.

'I changed heaps of *yours*!'

'Kendall wears a nappy!' Amandeep exclaimed.

'I don't!' Kendall shrieked. He punched me hard in the stomach. 'Tell her I don't.'

'Ouch,' I said, doubled up. 'Will you give over punching, it *hurts*. Listen, you must never ever hit



Mum in the tummy now. You could really hurt her – *and* the baby.'

'Kendall wears a nappy, a nappy, a nappy!' Amandeep chanted.

Kendall punched her too. She punched him straight back, her little fist as hard as a stone. Kendall howled. I ended up having to carry him half the way home.

'It's your own fault, stupid,' I said, after I'd said goodbye to Harpreet. 'You hit her in the first place. And she's much better at fighting than you are. You shouldn't take any notice when she teases you.'

'But I *don't* wear a nappy!'

'I know. And she knows. She was just being silly.'

'I don't like her any more. I want George!' Kendall butted my shoulder with his head, trying to turn me into turquoise plush.

George had been banished from school because he'd attacked too many children in the infants. He lurked behind Kendall and then bobbed out and gnawed their legs. Kendall's teacher kept telling him off. Kendall said it wasn't him, it was George, and sharks couldn't help biting legs, it was their nature.

Kendall's teacher had a word with me. I told Kendall to quit it. Kendall said he'd try, but he couldn't always stop George.

'Bitey bitey bitey,' Kendall shouted, while George attacked a big boy called Dean who said Kendall was a nutter. George couldn't *really* bite –



but Dean could. He bent down and sank his teeth straight into Kendall's skinny leg.

Mum was furious when she saw the bite marks on Kendall. She was all set to charge up to the school and have a punch-up with the teacher, big Dean and his even bigger mother. I told Mum the whole story and she backed down. She whacked Kendall over the head with George and said he had to stay shut up at home while Kendall went to school.

Kendall wept and wailed every morning when he had to say goodbye to George. Mum told him it was his own fault and wouldn't give in.

Jake bought Kendall special shark-shaped turquoise jelly sweets to cheer him up on the way to school. Kendall sucked the shark sweets but howled just as hard. Turquoise drool ran down his chin and dripped onto his T-shirt.

I tried to turn Kendall's bed into an aquarium for George, spreading Jake's blue denim jacket over the cover and draping my green socks here and there like seaweed. I said George could be a basking shark, so he'd love lolling around all day doing nothing.

'He'll miss me terribly,' Kendall wept.

'If he gets a little bit lonely he can always snuffle into your pillow and pretend it's you,' I said.

'What can *I* snuffle into at school?' Kendall asked.

I suggested snipping a tiny sliver off George's fin to go in Kendall's pocket to use like a very tiny



cuddle blanket. Kendall didn't like the idea of a mini-amputation. He snuffled into me instead.

I sighed about it, but I quite liked being needed so much. I'd have to watch out for Kendall when the new baby came. I'd make a big fuss of *both* of them. I'd pick Kendall up from school and the baby from the nursery and take them for walks in the park. I'd find a *proper* park with swings and a duck pond and an ice cream van. I'd strap Kendall into one swing and then sit on another with the baby on my lap.

We'd feed the ducks. I'd hold the baby on one hip and hang onto Kendall's T-shirt tight while he chucked bread into the water. Then we'd feed ourselves, an ice cream for me, a red lolly for Kendall and a little lick of ice cream for the baby.

I'd be utterly Lola Rose, my hair down to my waist, and much much much thinner. Maybe people would think I was the baby's mother. Maybe I'd go ahead and have my own babies, seeing I was so good with little children. Or maybe I'd start my own nursery and we'd make collages out of sticky paper and macaroni and fruit gums . . .

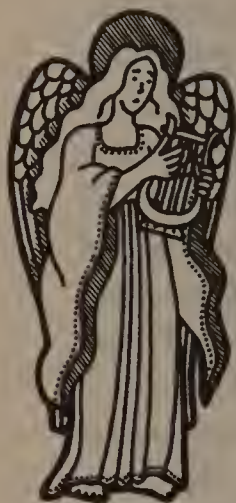
I played this pretend game all the way home. My arms ached holding Kendall but I didn't care. I jiggled him up and down, singing the 'Lucky lucky lucky' song.

I'd stopped worrying.

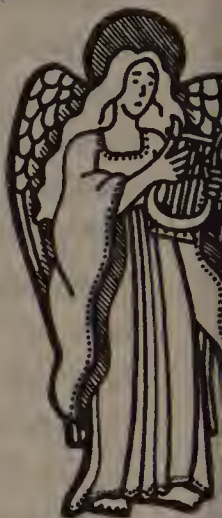
I didn't know that the worst worry was just about to start.



## Thirteen



# The Lump



Mum and Jake were at home, sitting at either end of their new sofa bed. Mum's eyes were red and puffy. She pressed her lips together, like she was scared she was going to start crying again. Jake kept looking anxiously at her. His eyes were red too. *He* hadn't been crying, had he?

Mum looked at us. 'What are you staring at me like that for?' she said.

Jake reached out and tried to take her hand. 'Tell them!' he said.

Mum snatched her hand away. 'Shut up!' she said.



'Tell us what?' I said, getting really scared.

'We know anyway!' said Kendall.

'What do you know?' said Mum, looking startled.

'You're going to have a baby!' said Kendall.

Mum gave one high-pitched yelp of laughter.

'No I'm not.'

'Yes you are, Lola Rose said.'

'Well Lola Rose doesn't know what she's talking about,' said Mum, folding her arms and glaring at me.

My new baby withered away inside its flowery dungarees until it was just a little purple smear.

'So what is it then? Are you and Jake splitting up?'

'I wouldn't be surprised,' said Mum.

'No, we're not!' said Jake – but he didn't sound certain.

'Dad hasn't found us, has he?' I whispered. I looked wildly round the room, scared he was hiding, waiting to pounce.

'It's not your dad. It's not *anything*,' said Mum. She got up to fill the kettle, switching the tap on so fiercely she sprayed herself with water. 'Bum! I'm having a cup of tea. Who wants one?'

'Your mum's got a lump,' said Jake.

He mumbled it so I wasn't quite sure what he'd said. And then when the words echoed in my head they still didn't make any sense. A lump? I looked at Mum, trying to see this lump on her head, her arm, wherever.

'I told you to shut it, Jake,' Mum said furiously. 'The kids don't need to know.'



'They'll have to know if you're going into hospital.'

'I'm. Not. Going. Into. Hospital,' said Mum, dabbing her wet front violently with the tea towel.

'The doctor said—'

'Yeah, well, he was probably just talking rubbish to scare me. I'm *fine*, I keep telling you. Do I look ill? There's nothing wrong with me. And I'm not going into hospital so they can slice bits off me.' Mum stopped jabbing her chest and wrapped her arms round herself.

'Mum? What lump?' I went to her and tried to cuddle her but she pulled away from me.

'It's nothing nothing nothing,' she said fiercely.

It was something something something.

She'd had a lump in her breast for months and months. A lump that was getting bigger and bigger. She'd kept quiet about it, hoping it would clear up by itself. Then Jake felt it and said she should go to the doctor. We didn't *have* a doctor here so Jake dragged her to his.

'He says your mum needs to go to this clinic as soon as possible. He's getting her an emergency appointment.'

'Yeah, well, he can stick his emergency appointment because I'm not going. I'm not having some creep feeling me up and telling me I need my boob chopped off.'

I'd made the tea for Mum but she was shaking now. Her teeth clinked against the mug every time she tried to take a sip.

I started shaking too.



‘He said it might not come to that. It could just be a cyst or something,’ said Jake. ‘And anyway, if it *is* bad news then it’s just a little routine operation, that’s what he said.’

‘Little!’ said Mum. ‘I’m not having them cutting me, ruining my looks. Who’d want me then, for God’s sake?’

She looked at Jake. I willed him to say the right thing but he couldn’t come out with anything at all.

Kendall started to cry. I picked him up and hugged him tight.

‘There, look, you’re getting the kiddies all upset!’ said Mum. ‘Why can’t you keep your big mouth shut, Jake?’

‘I was only trying to help,’ he said.

‘Yeah, well, we don’t need your help. We don’t need *you*,’ said Mum.

She put her hand over her mouth as if she couldn’t believe she’d just said it. She looked at Jake, her eyes brimming with tears, just like Kendall. She didn’t *mean* it – she was just saying stupid stuff because she was so scared. She needed Jake terribly.

He sat there like a dummy, fiddling with a strand of his long hair, winding it round and round his finger. Mum started crying. Jake didn’t budge an inch so she had to crawl over to him. She leant on his chest and howled all over his shirt, making black smudges on the blue denim. Mum said she was sorry and Jake said it was OK and she was going to be fine. But he sounded like he was



reading from the telephone directory and his eyes stared into the shadows in the corner of our living room.

I couldn't sleep that night. I ate my way furtively through a whole big packet of fruit gums in bed, even though I'd eaten an enormous cheese and pineapple pizza for tea. I lay this way and that, my mouth stoppered with sticky gums, my hands clutching my swollen tummy.

Kendal snuffled in his sleep beside me, George clasped to his chest. Mum and Jake were awake for ages. I heard them whispering, on and on. Mum started crying and I sat up in bed, wondering if I should run to her. But then I heard Jake saying stuff and lots of sighing and then the bed started creaking.

I put my head under the pillow, not wanting to hear any more. I wanted to burrow right through the pillow into some sugar-candy sleep-land where nothing bad ever happened and everyone lolled on great soft sofas and sucked sweets. I started to dream it, lying on a sofa, but it started tipping crazily, making me feel sick. A stream of strawberry-orange-lemon gushed out of my mouth. I was whirled round in this lurid water, hurtled out to a vast ocean where huge dark shapes were swimming.

Mum tried to act as if nothing were wrong the next morning. She wouldn't talk about the lump. She kept it up for days, pretending she didn't have a worry in the world. She sang loudly all round



the flat but she wasn't fooling anyone, not even Kendall.

One night I woke up in the middle of the night needing to pee. I walked into the bathroom. Mum was in there, nightie in her hand, staring at herself in the mirror. She had her head tilted, hands on her hips, breasts stuck right out as if she were posing for a glamour photo. She had a silly smile on her face but there were tears trickling down her cheeks.

She gasped when she saw me and covered her chest with her arms. I wondered if the lump stuck out and looked scary.

'Knock, can't you?' Mum said crossly, turning her back on me and tugging her nightie over her head.

'Mum, are you going to go to that clinic?'

'Nope.'

'But what if the lump gets bigger? What if—?'

'Just shut up about it, Jayni.'

'Lola Rose,' I whispered.

'Yeah, Lola Rose, whatever. Just go back to bed, *now*.'

So I went back to bed even though I badly needed to pee. I hunched up, holding myself, wishing I knew what to do.

I hadn't told Harpreet. I'd let her burble on about babies. I didn't want to tell her about the lump because it was so scary. I didn't want to make it seem real. But it was getting so I couldn't think of anything else. Harpreet caught me crying in the school toilets and kept on at me until I told her why.



‘Will you swear not to tell anyone?’

Harpreet swore solemnly on her little sister’s life. ‘What is it, Lola Rose? Is it about the baby?’

‘There isn’t a baby,’ I said.

Harpreet blinked at me with her beautiful eyes. ‘Did she lose it?’ she whispered.

‘No, she was never having a baby. You got it all wrong. She’s . . . she’s got this lump. Here.’ I gestured in the air above my own flat chest.

‘Oh help,’ said Harpreet. ‘Is it *cancer*?’

I jumped as if she’d said a very bad swear word. No one had dared say it before.

‘I don’t know. She’s supposed to go to this hospital clinic to find out. But she says she’s not going.’

‘She’ll have to go! Is she nuts?’

‘She’s always been a little bit nuts about stuff like that.’ I washed my hands in the basin very slowly, rubbing the soap until it made bubbles.

‘My great-auntie had breast cancer,’ said Harpreet.

‘Did she get better?’

There was a horrible pause. I rubbed and rubbed my hands until they wore white lather gloves.

‘Well, I don’t want to say this, Lola Rose, but actually she died.’

I clasped my soapy hands.

‘But she was much older than your mum.’

‘Does that make a difference?’

‘Well, it’s bound to. My great-auntie was an old lady. And she had all these strokes too. That’s how she got the cancer my mum said. She had a



fall and hit her chest. She was bruised all over. And then she got the cancer.'

I stopped still, thinking about my mum's bruised breasts. 'Is that how you get breast cancer?' I whispered. 'Could you get it if someone hits you hard?'

'Well. Maybe. I don't know. It's just what my mum says and she's not always right. Oh Lola Rose, don't cry again.'

'I'm not,' I said. I knew Harpreet was totally wrong. But I still didn't like her saying it. I rubbed my eyes fiercely and then screamed as the soap stung them.

Harpreet had to slosh water in my face and rub the soap away with the hem of her school skirt. It hurt horribly but I didn't really care. Harpreet put her arms round me when she'd got the soap off.

'I bet your mum doesn't have cancer at all, Lola Rose. It'll just be some silly old lump that doesn't *mean* anything.'

'That's what Jake says. But he says Mum should still go and get the lump taken out.'

'Well, obviously.'

'What do you think will happen if she doesn't? Will the lump get bigger and bigger and bigger?' I saw an awful image of Mum with one breast blowing up like a balloon, all warty and revolting.

'Maybe,' said Harpreet. 'Don't look so scared though. Your mum will be all right, honest.'

'Do you promise?' I said foolishly, as if Harpreet was a medical expert *and* a fortune teller.

'I promise promise promise,' said Harpreet firmly.



Mum was out when Kendall and I got back from school.

'Has she gone to the hospital?' I asked Jake.

'You know she won't go near the place. She's mad if you ask me,' said Jake. He had Mum's make-up mirror propped up in front of him, so he could draw himself. He stopped, looked at the piece of paper, sighed and crumpled it up. He started on a fresh page, screwing up his eyes to look at himself.

'Let's play on the computer, Jake,' said Kendall, tugging at his arm.

'Leave off, mate. No, the computer's stuffed. You've been mucking about on it, haven't you?'

'No!' said Kendall. 'Well. Not much. You can fix it, Jake. You always fix it.'

'I can't fix it this time,' said Jake. 'Will you leave off, Kendall, you're jogging me.'

Kendall's face crumpled.

'Come on, Kendall, I'll see if I can get the computer working,' I said, switching it on, though I knew zilch about boring old computers.

'It's stuffed, I tell you,' said Jake, switching it off again.

'Well, couldn't you just play with Kendall for two minutes? Look, he's crying.'

'He's always bawling,' said Jake. 'I've never known such a crybaby. I've got this portrait assignment, OK? I'm late handing it in as it is. Very very late. You do realize I've hardly set foot in college since I met your mum?' He



said it as if we'd sellotaped him to the chair.

'You could do Kendall's portrait, couldn't you? Or mine? Look!' I copied one of Mum's favourite poses, head tilted up, mouth slightly open, chest thrust forward, hand on hip, one knee slightly bent.

'For God's sake,' said Jake cruelly.

I rushed off to the bathroom, not wanting Jake to call me a crybaby too. 'I hate him,' I muttered, hugging myself.

I wanted my mum.

She didn't come back for tea. Jake didn't seem to care too much. They'd obviously had another row. He went on moodily sketching until way past tea time. I made baked beans on toast for Kendall and me. I didn't make Jake anything to show I was mad at him.

'Mum will be late for her evening shift down the pub,' I said.

'That's her look-out,' said Jake. 'As if I care.'

'Why are you being so *horrible*?'

'Look, it's not me. I'm not the one that's changed. This is all getting so heavy.'

'Mum can't help having this lump.'

'Yeah, but she won't deal with it like any normal woman. She has to make all this into such a drama. It's probably nothing. Women have lumps all the time, it doesn't mean it's – it's—'

'Cancer,' I said.

'What's cancer?' said Kendall.

'It's an illness,' said Jake.

Kendall paused, pushing baked beans from



one side of his plate to the other. 'Is Mum really sick?'

'Sick in the head, more like,' said Jake.

'She's sick in the head putting up with *you*,' I said. I golloped my baked beans and ate Kendall's leftovers too. I still felt empty so I ran my finger round the baked bean tin to lick up the juice.

'Don't do that, you'll cut yourself,' said Jake.

I took no notice – and then caught my finger on the jagged edge of the tin. 'Ouch!'

'You idiot,' said Jake. 'I *told* you.'

He held my throbbing finger under the cold tap and then wrapped it up in one of Mum's scarves because we didn't have a bandage or a hankie.

'Mum will create if I get blood on it,' I said.

'Tough,' said Jake. 'She should be here to look after you.'

'Don't you love her any more, Jake?'

He tied the scarf in a neat bow, frowning. 'Look, I never said I *loved* your mum. I mean, it's been great – she can be so cute and silly and funny when she's not in one of her moods. But this was never like a for ever thing.'

I pulled away from him so abruptly that the scarf unravelled. '*Mum* thinks it's for ever.'

'You could have fooled me. You should have heard the things she said to me this afternoon,' said Jake sulkily. 'Watch out, you'll make your finger bleed again. Give it here.'

'I'll do it,' I said, fiddling with the end of the scarf. 'I *knew* you two had had a row.'



'Your mum's certainly got a big mouth on her,' said Jake. 'Was she that lippy with your dad, eh?'

I stood still. I pressed my lips together.

'What is it with your dad?' said Jake. 'Your mum gets that exact expression if I ever mention him.'

'Yeah. Well. We don't talk about him.'

'You kids don't get to see him ever?' Jake looked over at Kendall, who was sitting in the corner, muttering to George. 'Kendall misses him a lot, you know. I guess that's why he's all over me.'

'He *likes* you. He thought you were for ever too. Like a new dad.'

'You must be joking! I'm not *old* enough to be a dad. I'm only twenty, for God's sake.'

'My mum had me when she was seventeen. Jake, where *is* she? Do you think she's gone straight to the pub to do her shift?'

'I tell you, I don't know. She just went storming out. She's lucky I didn't do the same. What would you kids have done then, eh?'

'We'd be fine. Mum knows I can look after Kendall.'

'I suppose you can. Better than your mum!'

I couldn't help being pleased he said that, even though it was mean to Mum. I didn't know what to do about her. I knew she'd *probably* be all right. She'd run off before, several times, sometimes when we were living back with Dad, sometimes since. She was often away for ages but she always came back.



I *knew* that. But I still worried. Maybe she'd gone storming off in such a rage she hadn't looked when she crossed the road. Maybe she'd seen a car coming and she was in such a state she'd darted across anyway. Maybe she was so scared about the lump and losing her looks she *wanted* to get knocked over . . .

I put on my denim jacket.

'What are you up to, Lola Rose?' said Jake, as I walked towards the door.

'I'm going out.'

'Oh no, you're not playing that trick on me again.'

'I'm going looking for *Mum*.'

'No you're not. You're staying right here. Don't even try arguing with me this time.'

'You can't stop me,' I said.

Maybe he could. He wasn't scary like my dad but he was quite strong. I'd seen him lift Mum up in his arms as easily as I lifted Kendall. I didn't feel like lucky Lola Rose who might sweet-talk her way round him. I felt like stupid, sad Jayni. So I took my denim jacket off again and played with Kendall for a bit and then put him to bed.

I cuddled up beside him. My hand was sore so I stuck it into my armpit. It was very painful just getting a tiny cut. I wondered what it would feel like to have a large lump of breast sliced off your body.

I hugged Kendall tight, his feathery hair tickling my chin. I breathed in his sweet, warm smell. He moaned in his sleep and fought himself



free, stretching out in a windmill shape so I couldn't cuddle him. It felt as if he was abandoning me.

I must have gone to sleep at some time – and then woke with a start when the door banged. I heard voices, Mum laughing, sounding funny. Jake said something. Then someone else spoke. Another man.

Kendall sat bolt upright. 'Is it Dad?' he asked.

I crept to the door, Kendall following. I listened, the blood drumming in my head. The man spoke again. He sounded uneasy and embarrassed.

It wasn't Dad.

Mum laughed again but she sounded as if she might also be crying. I went rushing through to the living room. She was staggering in those high heels, her arm draped round the neck of a strange fat man, his shirt tight over his big belly. He had dark sweat circles under his arms. It was obviously a strain keeping Mum upright. Jake was staring at them, his eyes screwed up. He looked as if he was watching an awful television soap and couldn't wait to change channels.

'Mum?'

'Ah! My little L-L-Lola Rose!' Mum said. She spoke as if she had a mouthful of sweets. I knew that voice. She was very drunk.

'Go to bed, Kendall,' I said. 'I'll put you to bed too, Mum.'

I tried to unhook her from the fat man.

'I don't *want* to go to bed. I want to *party*,' said



Mum, clinging to the man. 'L-L-Lola whatwasit? – ah yes, Rose. My Rosy Posy. I want you to meet my boss Barry.'

Barry bobbed his head. 'I'm not actually. Not any more,' he said, reaching round to unwind Mum's arm himself.

'You're not *Barry*?' said Mum, trying to focus on him. 'Well, blow me, you *look* like Barry, and you sound like Barry too.'

'Yeah, I'm Barry all right, but I'm not your boss, not any more, Vic.'

*'Victoria!'*

'Whatever. I've given you fair warning, darling. No more drinking on the job.'

'But you and me are mates, Barry,' said Mum, pursing her lips and pecking her head forward, trying to kiss him. 'I'm your little lark, remember?'

Jake grunted in disgust and turned his back on them.

'You're my little liability,' said Barry.

He pulled himself free so violently that I wasn't ready and nearly dropped Mum.

'Whoops!' said Mum, staggering.

I staggered too, trying to support her.

'Shall we dance?' Mum said.

Kendall came rushing over in his T-shirt and pants. 'I'll dance, Mum,' he said, hanging onto her legs.

'Yes, let's all dance,' said Mum, patting him fondly on the head. 'My little boy, my big girl – my lovely lovely kids.' She stopped swaying and



looked straight at Barry. Maybe she wasn't quite as drunk as she was pretending to be. 'I've got to work to feed my kids, Barry, you know that. So I'll be in to work tomorrow usual time, right? Stone cold sober, I promise.'

'You can be sober or you can be roaring drunk. It's all the same to me,' said Barry. 'You're not working for me any more. You're Trouble with a capital T.'

Mum came out with a mouthful of abuse. Kendall giggled nervously at the rude words.

'That's nice, isn't it?' said Barry. 'Swearing like that in front of your precious kids. And after I took the trouble – and the flak from my old lady – to drive you home. You make me sick, Victoria Luck.'

'You make *me* sick,' Mum shouted as he slammed the door. She kept yelling it, over and over.

It was the wrong thing to say in the circumstances. I got her to the bathroom in time and held her forehead. She knelt over the toilet and was sick again and again.

'It's OK, Mum,' I whispered as she moaned. 'It's OK, Mum, I'm here.'

But she kept looking round, tears dribbling down her cheeks, mouth puckered.

She was looking for Jake. But he wouldn't go near her, not even when she kept calling his name.



# Fourteen



# Us Three

Jake left the next morning. He could see it was a good time because Mum could barely move. She groaned when she sat up in bed and she still couldn't even drink a glass of water without being sick. She watched Jake packing up his paints and drawing pads and jeans and cassettes. He was wearing all the extra presents she'd bought him – hand-tooled cowboy boots, the thick silver bracelet, a denim jacket.

He glanced at the computer.

'Yeah, walk off with that too, why don't you,'



Mum whispered, watching him. Her eyes were sad slits.

‘No, no, it’s for the kids,’ said Jake. Maybe he remembered it was broken.

‘Mr Big Heart,’ Mum murmured.

‘Look, don’t be like that, Vic—’

‘Like what? My guy clears off because I’ve got cancer and I’m supposed to be what? Happy?’

‘You don’t know you’ve *got* cancer. I bet you anything you like you haven’t. And I’m *not* clearing off because of that.’

‘It’s because the money’s run out,’ I said.

I got into bed beside Mum. She winced as I made the bed move. I edged further in very slowly and put my arm round her. She smelt bad but I knew she still needed holding.

‘You’ve got it in one, Lola Rose,’ she said.

‘That’s rubbish. I’m not like that. Look, this was never meant to be permanent. We just had fun together, that’s all. I couldn’t have stayed once term is over anyway – you know I’m going travelling.’

‘Well, get on your travels now,’ said Mum. ‘Get lost.’

She wouldn’t kiss him goodbye. Maybe it was because she hadn’t had a chance to brush her teeth. I wouldn’t kiss him either. I ducked my head when he tried. But Kendall came running. He threw himself at Jake and hugged him hard, clinging to him like a little monkey.

‘Don’t go, don’t go, don’t go,’ he begged.



'I've got to go just now, Kendall. But I'll come back and see you, little mate, OK?'

I had to drag Kendall off him. I got kicked and punched for my pains. I had to fight back a bit because he was really hurting. Mum dragged herself out of bed to help. Then we heard the front door bang. We stopped and stood like statues, all hanging onto each other.

'He's gone,' said Mum. She ripped the moon-stone necklace off and threw it on the floor.

'He's coming back, he said,' Kendall sobbed.

'No he's not,' I said. 'We don't want him back. Good riddance.'

'Then . . . will Dad come back?' said Kendall.

'No! We don't want *any* men – not Dad, not Jake, not that big fat Barry, *no one*.'

'That's right,' said Mum. 'To hell with the lot of them.' She leant against the wall, groaning.

'Mum? Are you all right? Is it the lump?' I asked, panicking.

'My head's hurting, that's all,' said Mum. 'Will you just *forget* my bloody lump.'

She went back to bed and pulled the covers right up over her head. I knew she was just wanting to hide but it looked awful, as if she were in a shroud. I screwed up my face and hit my forehead to stop myself thinking it.

'Lola Rose?' said Kendall.

'It's OK. I've got a headache too. No wonder – all that yelling, you little monster!'

Kendall pulled a goofy monster face, curling his fingers into claws. He didn't really *want* to



play. I saw him glancing fearfully at Mum. But he roared and ran round the room while I played the monster catcher with my big net.

'For God's sake, clear off to school, you kids,' Mum moaned.

I didn't want to leave her on her own. 'I'll stay and look after you, Mum. I'll take Kendall to school but then I'll nip back. I can make you black coffee and fix you some soup for lunch.'

'I'm not ill, I've just got a hangover. All I want to do is sleep. You go to school, do you hear. I don't want old Bossy Boots Balsam ringing me up and giving me grief.'

So I went to school, though I couldn't get my head round any of the lessons. Kendall was in a state too. I shouldn't have started him off on the stupid little monster game. He wouldn't stop roaring in the classroom. They had to call for me to calm him down.

'Has anything happened to upset him at home?' Kendall's teacher asked.

'No, miss,' I said quickly.

'He was really starting to settle down, making a few friends – but now we seem back to square one. Maybe I should talk with your mum, Lola Rose.'

'Well . . .'

'Or Dad? Kendall seems so very fond of him.'

'He talks about our *dad*?'

'Well, your step-dad.'

'We haven't got a step-dad,' I said firmly.

When I got Kendall on his own I gave him a



good shake that set him off howling. 'It's your own fault! Just keep your mouth shut at school, right?'

Kendall whined all the way home. I wished I could run right away from him. And Harpreet. She was going on and on about her mum and how she'd thrown a fit because she'd caught her putting make-up on.

'Not even proper make-up, just that glitter stuff, you know. But my mum goes bananas, right, acts like I'm this total slag. She goes on about her daughters bringing disgrace on the family. You are just so *lucky*, Lola Rose. Your mum doesn't care.'

'My mum does care,' I said stiffly.

'Yeah, but she lets you do what you want. Don't go all snotty on me! What's the matter?' Harpreet nudged nearer, lowering her voice. 'Is she worse, your mum? Is she getting really sick?'

'No!'

'Yes,' said Kendall, snuffling. 'She was ever so sick, I saw.'

'That was because she was drunk, stupid.'

'Your mum was *drunk*?' said Harpreet, rolling her eyes like her mother.

'Not really *drunk* drunk,' I said quickly. 'She's had a hard time. You don't understand, Harpreet. And neither do you, Kendall, so you just shut up.' I gave him another shake. 'Telling people Jake's our step-dad!'

'He is! What is he, then?'



'He's nothing. He's gone now anyway.'

'He's gone! You mean he's left your mum?' said Harpreet.

Her eyes looked like they were going to pop right out of their sockets. I hated the way she was hanging on my every word. It was like she couldn't wait to hear more scandal. I wasn't sure I wanted her for my friend after all.

'My mum chucked him out. And good riddance,' I said, slapping my hands together.

'My mum said it could never last,' said Harpreet.

'I wish you and your mum would keep your noses *out* of our business,' I said.

I seized Kendall by the wrist and hauled him along, running away from Harpreet and Amandeep. Kendall yelled because I was pulling too hard but I didn't ease up. I ran faster and faster, my heart pounding. Every beat said Mum-Mum-Mum.

I thought she'd still be cowering under the covers – but her bed was empty. The whole flat seemed empty.

'Mum?' I called. '*Mum!*'

'Hiya,' said Mum, coming out of the bathroom. She was wearing her white jumper and leather skirt and high heels, looking a million dollars.

'Oh Mum!' I said, and burst into tears.

'Oh my Gawd, what's up with you?' said Mum, shaking her head. She'd just washed her hair and it bounced on her shoulders.

'Are you all right, Mum?'



‘Of course I am, you silly sausage,’ said Mum, putting her arms round me. Kendall scrabbled to get in on the cuddle too. Mum picked him up, laughing. ‘What’s up with you, babe?’

‘Lola Rose ... has ... been ... horrid!’ he gasped, out of breath with running and crying.

‘Rubbish,’ said Mum, tickling him where his neck joined his shoulders.

Kendall hunched over, squealing with laughter though his eyelashes were still stuck together with tears. I looked at his damp little face and felt awful.

‘*I’m* rubbish. I *have* been horrid. Kendall, I’m really really sorry.’

Kendall blinked up at me. ‘I *might* forgive you,’ he said, sounding so funny that we all laughed.

‘Are you hungry, kids? Let’s have tea, eh?’ said Mum.

She fixed us this lovely treat meal just like a birthday party, with sausages on sticks and crisps and baby pizzas and ice cream in new glass bowls, purple for me, red for Kendall, with our new names written on our puddings in strawberry sauce.

‘See this, Harpreet!’ I said inside my head. ‘My mum cares for us big time!’

‘You’re the best mum ever,’ I said, tucking in.

‘No, I’m not,’ said Mum, nibbling crisps. ‘I haven’t been very mumsie at all recently. I’ve left you kids alone too much. I’m going to be here for you now. No more shifts down that stupid pub of an evening. I’m well shot of that. I’ll get a day job. I was thinking, maybe I could work on a make-up



counter, or be a hairdresser, say – I’m good at doing hair, aren’t I, Lola Rose?’

‘You’re the best, Mum. You do your hair beautifully,’ I said, patting her blonde curls. I thought you probably had to train for those jobs first but I didn’t like to say anything to spoil Mum’s mood.

‘I’m well shot of J-A-K-E too,’ Mum said, raising her eyebrows at me significantly.

Kendall hadn’t caught on to spelling yet and carried on licking his sausage like a lolly.

‘You bet, Mum,’ I said.

Kendall experimented, dipping his sausage in his ice cream.

‘Eat your sausage properly, Kendall!’ I said. ‘That looks totally disgusting.’

‘It gets mixed up in my tummy,’ Kendall said. ‘So why can’t I mix it up in my mouth too?’

‘OK OK, but don’t be surprised if no one ever wants to sit down and eat a meal with you.’

‘I don’t want anyone. Apart from George,’ said Kendall, dipping George’s furry jaws into the ice cream bowl too.

‘You’re getting him all *mucky*,’ I nagged, but I was relieved he wasn’t throwing a tantrum about Jake.

I couldn’t get over how calm Mum was about him. We had a girly heart-to-heart after Kendall was in bed.

‘I’m glad to be rid of him,’ Mum said bravely.

I looked at her.

‘OK, I was nuts about him at first. Well, he is



gorgeous. You must admit it, Lola Rose, he looks an absolute dreamboat – that hair, that flat stomach, that little bum—’

‘Mum!’

‘Well, you know what I mean. But I suppose I knew it wouldn’t last, what with me being a little bit older and you kids and everything.’ Mum sighed, smoothing the skin over her forehead. ‘Am I getting all wrinkly, Lola Rose? I’ve got frown lines, haven’t I? What do you reckon on that Botox treatment? Do you think it would work? Maybe I’ll treat myself if I get lucky on the lottery cards again, eh?’

‘You’re bonkers, Mum. You haven’t got any wrinkles!’

‘I *have*. And I’m getting all saggy and baggy too,’ said Mum, sticking her chest out and staring down at herself critically. She patted her breasts as if they were two puppies. ‘Poor things. Still, I don’t think this one’s going to have to be sliced off.’ She looked at me, her eyes very big and blue. ‘I went to the hospital today and saw this consultant.’

‘Mum! You didn’t say!’

‘Well, I wasn’t going to keep the damn appointment. But then I thought maybe I ought to. I mean, if it’s just us, Lola Rose, then I can’t take chances, can I? And if I *have* got something serious then I need to get it treated, right?’

‘I wish you’d told me you were going. I’d have gone with you. You hate hospitals,’ I said, taking Mum’s hand.

‘It *was* a bit scary. But I kept thinking I had to show Jake I’m not gutless. I had to wait *ages* and I



was still feeling a bit groggy with the drink so I very nearly walked out. But I got talking to these other women waiting with me and it made me feel a bit better, knowing we'd *all* got lumps. And then the consultant himself was *gorgeous* – quite old, of course, but so good looking, lovely suit and beautiful hands with very sensitive, long fingers. It felt very weird taking my top off for him. I went all giggly and blushed like a schoolgirl.'

'Mum! You're not meant to flirt with your doctor.'

'Oh, you know me, I'll flirt with a floormop if no one else is around. But Mr Key is the bee's knees, I swear. He says he's not going to cut my boob off even if it is . . . cancer.' She said it in a whisper. 'He's just taking the lump out, and some little thingies under my arm, in case they've got it too. So isn't that great? He swears he'll be able to cut kind of *under* my boob so it'll hardly show.'

'When's he doing it, Mum?'

'He said he'll put me at the top of his list.'

I thought about Mum in hospital. Then I thought about Kendall and me. My throat dried. I swallowed and waggled my tongue around to make a bit of spit.

'Don't pull those silly faces. You look like poor old Bubble,' said Mum.

'Mum, what about Kendall and me? When you're in hospital?'

'Don't you worry about it, sweetheart. I asked a nurse and she said people only stay in a day or so. Well, I reckon I can have the little op and then discharge myself. So you'll only be on your own



one night. You can manage that, can't you darling?'

I wasn't sure. I knew I'd be scared. But I wasn't baby Jayni any more. I was supercool Lola Rose. 'Of course I'll manage, Mum, no bother,' I said.

'That's my girl,' said Mum. She put her arms round me. We hung onto each other and hugged until our arms ached.

Mum stayed lovely day after day. She didn't go for another job just yet. She said she'd wait until after her operation. We used up the last of the lottery money. Mum kept treating us. Kendall had red ice lollies cut up in his cornflakes for breakfast and red ice-lolly soup for his tea. She read him *Thomas the Tank Engine* until she was hoarse. She took him swimming and let George take a dip too, though he reeked of chlorine for ages afterwards.

Mum made me Cadbury's chocolate sandwiches for breakfast and Ribena cocktails for my tea. She did my hair in a different elaborate style every day and made me up properly so that I looked almost pretty.

She also bought me my very own pair of purple high heels! I still couldn't walk in them properly even though they fitted, but I didn't care. I staggered round and round the flat in them, my bum sticking out, my ankles wobbling. I kept sticking out a leg, admiring the tautness of my calves, the arch of my foot, the glossy sheen of the purple leather, the dizzying splendour of those soaring high heels.

'Walk naturally! You look as if you're on a tightrope,' Mum laughed.



Kendall kept begging to have a go in them. He looked a scream as he minced around like a miniature drag queen, his lips bright red from the lollies.

'What a weird pair of kids,' said Mum, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. Her eyes suddenly welled up. She said it was the smoke from her ciggie but I think that was an excuse.

I kept crying at odd moments too, even when I wasn't thinking about Mum. I missed an easy catch playing rounders and my team moaned at me and I burst into baby tears. Some of the girls in my class said catty things about my new hairstyles and I rushed to the toilets to cry. I got stuck doing some new maths problems and slumped in my desk, snivelling.

I didn't really care about dropped balls and dopey girls and decimals.

'What's the matter, Lola Rose?' everyone kept asking.

I couldn't tell them I was scared my mum was going to die.

No, of course she wasn't going to die. She probably didn't even have cancer. She was just going to have a tiny lump taken out, then she'd be as right as rain. I imagined Mum in a rainstorm, hair plastered to her head, hunched in her white jacket. She was soaked to the skin but she was smiling and singing, tap-dancing through the puddles in her high heels.



# Fifteen



## Voice of Doom

The letter came from the hospital. It was the first letter we'd had at our new address.

Mum tore open the envelope, her hands shaking so badly she tore the letter too. She held a half in either hand helplessly.

'Oh God, this is it, kids,' she said. 'I'm going in on Thursday. *This* Thursday. They don't give you much notice. Still, my Mr Key said he'd slot me in as soon as possible.' Mum smiled as if Mr Key was keen to make a date with her.

'I don't want you to go into hospital, Mum,' said Kendall. 'Not Thursday. You take me



swimming on Thursdays. You can't go.'

'I have to go, little mate,' said Mum.

But she didn't seem so sure on Wednesday night. She started drinking. I got scared she'd make herself sick again.

'You can't get drunk, Mum, not when you're going into hospital tomorrow,' I said, trying to sneak the bottle away.

'You put that right back, Lola Rose. In fact you can pour me another glass.'

'But Mum—' I poured her the tiniest measure. Then I deliberately dropped the bottle.

It made a horrible mess on the carpet. I cut my fingers trying to clear it up. Mum slapped me hard for being so clumsy. I cried. Then Mum cried too. We had a long, mournful cuddle. I carried Kendall into Mum's bed and we all huddled up together. I don't think Mum slept. She was wide awake whenever I woke up.

I kept having nightmares. George's chlorine smell made me dream we were all in the water, clinging to each other as we sank down and down where the sharks were waiting.

We got up very early. Mum had bought us croissants and Danish pastries as a treat for breakfast. She didn't eat a bite herself. Kendall picked out all the currants, licked the icing, but only ate a mouthful himself. I ate my way through three pastries, even though they'd gone a bit stale overnight. No matter how much I ate I couldn't stop the huge, empty feeling inside me.

Mum wouldn't let us say goodbye properly. 'We



won't make a thing of it or we'll all start howling. Go on, kids, off to school. I've got a treat in the fridge for you for tea. You be a good boy for Lola Rose, Kendall, and go to bed when she says. I'll be home as soon as I can make it. Don't come to the hospital just in case anyone asks why you're on your own. Go on then. Scram. Don't look so scared. I'll be fine. I promise you. I'm Lady Luck.'

I took Kendall to school – but then I came scurrying back home. Mum came rushing to the door at the sound of my key. Her face was pink with hope. I think she thought I was Jake.

'Lola Rose!'

'I'll help you pack your bag for the hospital and see you off properly.'

Mum sighed but she didn't have the energy to send me back to school. She got her case out. 'God, wasn't it weird, throwing all our things together that night your dad went for you,' she said. 'I wonder what he's doing now?'

'He'll be getting drunk. Singing. Chatting up girls. Fighting.' I opened Mum's chest of drawers, looking through her stuff.

'You don't think I should tell him, just in case . . . ' Mum stopped.

I stopped too. 'No.'

'But he *is* your dad. He does love you, darling. And there's Kendall, he was always so gentle with him.'

'No!'

I held up her best black nightie. 'You can't wear this, Mum. It's see-through,' I said.



‘No it isn’t,’ said Mum. ‘Well.’ She put her hand up inside the filmy nylon. ‘I suppose it is a bit. Still, maybe I’ll give Mr Key one last sneaky peep at a perfect pair of boobs before he goes digging for lumps.’

‘Shut up, Mum,’ I said.

‘It might look weird with bandages underneath though,’ said Mum mournfully. ‘Oh Gawd, maybe I’d better buy a new nightie on the way.’ She looked in her purse. ‘Maybe not. I’m going to have to get my act together work-wise the minute I get out of hospital. I should have done something about it sooner, but I just wanted to be with you kids.’

‘That’s what we wanted too, Mum. Look, what about *my* nightie? It’s clean – well, I’ve only worn it a couple of times. It would fit you easy-peasy.’

It was a white T-shirt with a teddy bear on the front. Mum looked at it and then folded it into her case. ‘OK, I’ll take it. I’ll look a bit daft but I’ll be decent. It’ll be like I’m cuddled up with you, Lola Rose. I’ll like that.’ Mum looked at me. ‘You will be all right, won’t you, lovie? Look, I’ll leave you my mobile just in case of emergencies. Don’t you run up a big bill though, there’s a good girl. You won’t mind being by yourselves tonight, will you?’

‘Of course not,’ I said quickly.

‘It’s not as if you’re really alone in the house,’ Mum said. ‘I mean, there’s Miss Parker downstairs and the two boys up above.’

‘Yes, Mum,’ I said. We both knew poor smelly Miss Parker couldn’t look after herself, let alone anyone else, and Mum and Steve and Andy



weren't on speaking terms any more. (Mum thought Steve was being overly friendly to Jake and told him to stop making eyes at her boyfriend. She said some other stuff too. Steve and Andy were mortally offended.)

Mum started biting the skin round her thumb. I gently took it out of her mouth.

'Quit that, Mum. We'll be fine.'

'You could always try to get hold of Jake. Though his mobile's switched off at the moment, the little whatsit.'

'Don't try to phone him, Mum. We don't need him. We don't need anyone.'

'You're such a good, grown-up girl, Lola Rose,' said Mum.

I tried hard to feel grown up. I made Mum a cup of tea and sat her down with a stale croissant while I packed her washing things and her hairbrush and her make-up. I slipped in a card at the bottom of her case. I'd made it for her.

I'd cut out a sad-looking baby bunny and stuck it in the middle, with little bits of tissue stuck on its ears and paws to look like bandages. I'd wondered about a bandage across its chest but decided that would be too literal. I surrounded him with flowers and butterflies and birds and wrote 'Get Well Soon, Mum – With Lots of Love from Lola Rose and Kendall' in my best handwriting. Kendall had added lots of kisses. He didn't do them carefully enough. The kisses were all different sizes and spoilt the symmetry of the design but I hoped Mum wouldn't mind.



I gave her my own kisses at the bus stop. I got a bit carried away.

‘That’s enough! You’ll wipe all my powder off,’ said Mum. She looked at my watch. ‘Oh to hell with this. I’ll go up the high street and get a minicab.’

‘But it’s miles to the hospital, Mum.’

‘Look, I’m an invalid! Why should I have to bum around on buses?’ said Mum.

So I went with her to the minicab firm. I kissed her again and gave her one last hug – and another and another – and then she got in the car and they drove off. I waved long after the minicab had gone down the street and round the corner, out of sight.

Then I stood there.

I kept seeing Mum waving back from inside the car, sending herself up, doing one of those slow, spread-fingered, fancy waves like royalty as she mouthed goodbye.

The terrible Voice of Doom spoke inside my head. *What if this really is goodbye? What if this is the last time you ever see your mum?*

I ran like mad to get out of earshot. I went into the HMV shop in the arcade, ramming on the headphones, turning the volume right up. My head started throbbing. It was only eleven o’clock but I decided to go and get some lunch. Mum had given me ten pounds, which seemed heaps. I had a burger and French fries and a large Coke. I crammed it down quickly and felt just as empty when I’d finished. It seemed too mean to Kendall to spend much more on myself. So I sat where I was, watching a mum with two little kids across



the way from me. The kids were just picking at their food. The moment they were wheeled off in their double buggy I whizzed over to their table. They'd left half a burger, heaps of French fries and most of a McFlurry ice cream. I stuffed them down so quickly I felt sick – even though I *still* felt empty.

I mooched round the shops for a while, nibbling at a bar of Cadbury's. I meant to save half of it for Kendall but I couldn't quite manage it. I didn't know what to do with myself. I didn't want to go back home in case it would feel too weird without Mum, even though I was used to her being out a lot. So like some sad little wimp I scuttled back to school. At least I got another lunch. I told the teacher I'd had a tummy upset but I was better now.

'Were you really sick?' Harpreet whispered.

She was trying to make friends with me again. I wanted to be her friend – but I was still mad at her.

'Yeah, I was sick because I was drunk like my mum,' I whispered back. 'We split a whole bottle of vodka.'

Harpreet's mouth opened in a big O. 'You never!'

'Of course I never,' I said. 'You're so thick sometimes, Harpreet. You'll believe anything.' Then I relented. 'No, you're not thick. You're thin as a pin. I'm the one who's thick, look.' I punched my big tummy. 'Yuck, I'm getting so fat, look!'

Harpreet giggled. 'Maybe *you're* pregnant,' she said.

We both laughed. It was OK now. We were friends again.

I told her my mum had gone into hospital.



'You poor thing, you must be so worried.'

'Yeah. Well. Obviously.'

'She'll be all right,' said Harpreet, patting my hand. 'So who's looking after you and Kendall if Jake's done a runner?'

'He hasn't. My mum got rid of him, I *said*.'

'Well. Whatever,' Harpreet said. 'So, who's coming? A granny? An auntie?'

I knew I shouldn't say but I couldn't help wanting to show off. 'No one's looking after us,' I said airily.

Harpreet boggled at me in a satisfying manner. 'You can't manage by yourselves!'

'Sure we can. It's only overnight.'

'My mum would never let me stay by myself. She wouldn't even let my *sister* stay home by herself last holidays and she was eighteen.'

'Don't tell your mum,' I said hurriedly, scared there might be trouble.

'I won't.'

'Promise?'

'Yeah, I swear,' said Harpreet, gesturing sealing her lips and cutting her throat. Her forehead wrinkled as she thought it all out. 'Who will cook your tea?' she said.

'I will. I often cook.'

It all depends what you mean by 'cook'. I could open a tin and make toast. That was kind of cooking. I knew Harpreet was thinking of the complicated curries she had at home.

'You're so cool, Lola Rose,' she said. 'It's like you're an adult already.'



She made me *feel* cool.

But then I had to go home and face the empty empty empty flat.

'I want Mum,' said Kendall, sitting down in the middle of the floor, burying his nose in George's matted fur.

'Yes, but you know Mum's in hospital. It's OK, you've still got me.'

'I don't want you, I want *Mum*,' said Kendall, screwing up his face.

'Shut up. And don't you dare cry! I'm fed up with you being such a grizzleguts. Now listen, *if* you're good I'll make you some tea. But if you're going to blub I'll think you're just a little baby and put a nappy on you and put you to bed.'

Kendall scowled at me. 'I don't like you.'

'I don't like you either,' I said. 'I wish I had a different brother. *Harpreet's* brother, he'd be great. But I'm stuck with you, Kendal mint cake, so I'll just have to get on with it. OK, let's check out the fridge.'

There were two cardboard boxes. One was a big pizza with a smiley face squiggled on the top in tomato sauce. The other was a vast chocolate cake with two layers of butter cream. Mum had pressed pink and purple Smarties on the frosted chocolate icing, spelling out YUM YUM.

I looked at the pizza. I looked at the chocolate cake.

I was the one who burst into tears.

Kendall watched me warily. 'Don't you like pizza and chocolate cake?'



'I love them,' I said, blowing my nose on the kitchen towel.

'Why are you crying then?'

'Because Mum's tried so hard. And I want her too. So that makes *me* Mrs Grizzleguts, right? You can call me that as much as you like.'

'Grizzleguts!' said Kendall.

I let him go on saying it until he was sick of it. It seemed like hours. But then everything seemed to last hours.

I heated the pizza and we ate half of it, and a big slice of chocolate cake each. I read *Thomas the Tank Engine* and drew Kendall a train picture, rubbing out again and again until I got all the wheels in a straight line. Then he coloured it in (ruining it). We ate some cold pizza and had another slice of chocolate cake. And another. Well, I did. Kendall just ate the Smarties.

It seemed like a whole day had passed but it was less than an hour. I switched on the telly to check the time because I was sure our clock had stopped.

Kendall and I watched for a while but then there was a hospital programme and I changed channels. We watched some comedy but we didn't laugh. It was like we were tuned into our own hospital channel, watching our mum being wheeled off to an operating theatre where men in masks attacked her with sharp instruments.

Kendall nudged nearer until he was sitting on my lap. I rested my chin on his head. His crewcut was growing out. He looked like a little baby duckling.



'You hair's so cute now, Kendall.'

Kendall stiffened. 'I want it cut off!'

'No, it's much nicer now.'

'I don't want to look nice. I don't want to look cute. I want to look tough.'

Dad had always marched him to the barber's for a number one hair cut. He didn't look tough. He looked like a bald little baby but Dad went on about him being a real tough nut.

'We don't see Dad now,' Kendall whispered to George. He turned round to me. 'We will still see Mum, won't we?'

'Of course we will! Tomorrow, when she comes back from the hospital.'

'Promise?'

'I promise,' I said.

The Voice of Doom mocked me. *How can you promise that? Maybe she won't ever come back.*

The Voice talked to me half the night. I felt so lonely, even cuddled up to Kendall. I clutched my Pinkie teddy bear like a sad little toddler. I heard Miss Parker's radio rumbling away underneath me. Then I heard the creak of floorboards above my head and the gurgle of water pipes when Steve or Andy went to the loo. Cars went past. Cats yowled. Drunks shouted. Then there were foot-steps outside.

Every time anyone walked along the pavement I tensed up.

The night went on and on for ever.



# Sixteen



## Home Alone

The mobile rang when Kendall and I were having breakfast.

‘Mum! Oh Mum!’ I said. ‘Are you OK? Does it hurt? Are you coming home now?’

‘I wish!’ said Mum. ‘I haven’t had the blooming operation yet. They faffed around yesterday with blood tests and X-rays. They’re doing the operation this morning. They’re not letting me have any breakfast and I’m *starving*.’

‘So – so when will you be back?’ I said, all my relief draining away.

‘Well, that’s the problem, sweetheart. This nurse



says I won't come round from the anaesthetic for hours, and even then I'll be so groggy I won't be able to put one foot in front of the other. And they'll have to change the dressings and there might be a drain too—'

'What's a drain?'

'I don't know. Look, darling, I can't go into all the ins and outs of it. I've borrowed the mobile from the lady in the bed next to me seeing as you've got mine so I'll have to be quick. Let me say hello to Kendall.'

I handed the phone over to him. Mum was obviously asking him questions because he kept nodding.

'Say something, Kendall – Mum can't see you,' I said.

'Hello, Mum,' said Kendall. 'Mum, can I go and see the real George again? Will you take me? And can I have some more toy sharks and then if we got some glass I could have my own aquarium and – Ouch! Stop it, Lola Rose! Give me the phone back, it's *my* turn to talk to Mum.'

'She doesn't want to listen to you burbling on about your stupid sharks,' I said. 'Mum?'

'You kids,' said Mum. 'Look, Lola Rose, I'll try to give you a ring tomorrow morning some time. I'll have to go now. Bye, darling. Be a good girl, eh?'

The phone went dead.

'You hurt me when you pushed me!' Kendall said, rubbing his chest. 'I think you've given me cancer now.'

'Shut *up*, Kendall.'



'You're so mean to me. *Everyone's* mean to me,' Kendall whined. 'Mum's mean. She said she'd be back today and I need her.'

'I need her too,' I said. 'Now stop complaining, finish your cornflakes and get ready for school.'

I was glad to get there. It made everything seem more normal. I didn't want to discuss Mum with Harpreet. Luckily we had a sex education lesson and we didn't discuss anything else all day. We watched a film where you actually saw this family undressed, totally naked. The whole class got the giggles, especially at the dad. The teacher got a bit narked and said she was disappointed in us for behaving so immaturity. She said there was nothing funny about human bodies.

'I think they're hilarious!' Harpreet whispered. 'That dad's willy! Yuck! Imagine him just walking around like that – it's disgusting. And the mum was just as bad showing off her boobies. I've never seen my mum and dad bare. I did walk in on my brother once in the bathroom and he got really really mad at me.'

'What's your brother look like then, Harpreet?'

Harpreet went into a peal of giggles – and when she found a banana in her lunch box at break we laughed so much we nearly wet ourselves.

I wanted to keep on and on laughing. I whispered to Harpreet all afternoon. I got told off twice and ended up being sent to Ms Balsam.

I thought I was going to get told off big time now. I didn't really care. I thought I might argue back, even throw a tantrum like Kendall.



But Ms Balsam simply sat me down and offered me a chocolate. I shook my head although they were posh chocolates in a big gift box.

‘Go on, help me out. I’m supposed to be on a diet but they’re so tempting. You eat a couple for me, there’s a good girl.’

I helped myself to a milk chocolate truffle. ‘Everyone keeps telling me to be a good girl,’ I said, with my mouth full.

‘I take it you’ve been behaving like a bad girl today?’ said Ms Balsam. She picked out a dark chocolate cherry. ‘Just to keep you company,’ she said, popping it in her mouth.

She rattled the box at me and I chose a raspberry cream – white chocolate with a little raised tip of pink. It looked like a tiny doll’s breast. I wondered what I was doing, stuffing my face with chocolate when my mum was in hospital. The sticky chocolate stuck to my teeth. My stomach lurched. I clapped my hand to my mouth.

‘In here, quickly,’ said Ms Balsam, leaping up. She steered me rapidly across the room. She opened a door and I was sick into her private toilet. Ms Balsam tucked my hair behind my ears and held my forehead. ‘There, there,’ she murmured.

When I was done she wiped my face with her own flannel and gave me a glass of water to sip. ‘Bit of a waste of my chocolates!’ she said. ‘Still, you did it very neatly. Well done!’

I giggled weakly.

‘So what’s the problem, Lola Rose?’ Ms Balsam sat on the edge of her desk, looking at me.



'I suppose I've got a tummy bug,' I said.

'Hmm,' said Ms Balsam. 'There's certainly something bugging *you*. You're not still hanging around with Ross and his little gang, are you?'

'No. I can't stick them now.'

'What about Peter? He's a good lad at heart. If you fancy a friend he'd maybe fit the bill.'

'I don't want a *boyfriend*. I'm happy with Harpreet.'

'Yes, I like Harpreet too – lovely girl. You're both lovely girls – but I gather you've been very giggly girls today. Giggling about sex, is that right?'

'Sort of.'

'Well. It *can* seem a bit funny at times. But let's hope you're over the giggles now. I should pop back to your classroom and apologize nicely, unless you think you might be sick again. Maybe I should send you home to Mum.'

I bit my lip. 'No, I'm fine,' I said, getting up quickly.

Ms Balsam put her hand on my shoulder. 'Mum's OK, isn't she, Lola Rose?'

The walls closed in. The floor wavered. I wanted to clutch Ms Balsam and weep against her chest. But I remembered what Mum had said. *Don't let her worm anything out of you else you'll be put into care.*

'Mum's fine,' I said, shrugging my shoulder away.

I went back to class and said sorry and sat meekly for the rest of lessons, head down, keeping out of trouble. Harpreet and I had a giggle again



on the way home. I kept whispering worse and worse things to set her off. I hated saying goodbye to her when we got to the Gabries' house.

Then it was just Kendall and me.

'Tell me something to make me laugh, Kendall,' I said. 'Go on, tell us a joke.'

'I know an elephant joke. Well, I think I do,' said Kendall.

He didn't. His joke went on for ages and then he forgot the punch line.

'OK, I'll tell you a joke,' I said.

'I don't think I like jokes,' said Kendall.

'Yes you do. I'll tell you one you'll like. What's yellow and dangerous?'

Kendall peered at me, his face screwed up anxiously.

'What's yellow and dangerous?' I repeated.

Kendall gave a high-pitched laugh.

'Why are you laughing?'

'Because it's a funny joke.'

'I haven't told it yet! Think, Kendall. What's yellow and dangerous?'

The Voice of Doom suddenly spoke, right behind my eyes, making them blink. *If he guesses the right answer your mother will be all right!*

I shook my head to try to shake myself free of it. Kendall shook his head too, copying me. His head looked as if it might snap straight off his little stalk neck.

'Don't, Kendall.' I grabbed his head and held it still. 'Now listen. This is such an easy-peasy joke. I'm sure you've heard it heaps of times



before. What's *yellow* and *dangerous*?'

I saw Kendall mouth *yellow* and *dangerous*. He was trying, I knew he was.

'I'll give you a clue, shall I? George would like this joke.'

'No he wouldn't. George doesn't like jokes either,' said Kendall.

'He'd like this one because it's about him. And you'll like it because it's about a yummy pudding. The old-fashioned sort that grans make.'

'I wish we had a gran,' said Kendall. 'Then she could look after us. Why haven't we got a gran?'

'She died.'

'Did she get run over?'

'No, she died of . . .' I couldn't say the word.

The Voice of Doom started up again.

'Think about the joke, Kendall!' I said, gripping him by the shoulders. I knew I was being ridiculous. It didn't make any difference whether Kendall knew the stupid joke or not. But I couldn't help myself. I went on saying it over and over again until Kendall cried.

'It's shark-infested custard!' I screamed at last.

I had a mad vision of Mum struggling in thick yellow custard, surrounded by sharks. I tried to argue with the Voice.

'Mum's going to be all right,' I said inside my head. 'She had the operation this morning and now she's right as rain and she'll come back home as soon as she can. She might even be home already, lying on her bed, waiting to give us a big surprise.'



I knew there wasn't much chance but I couldn't help hoping.

I ran down the road, Kendall trailing after me. The Voice of Doom changed tack, telling me if I could get indoors before it counted one hundred then Mum would really be there. I got in the front door just as it reached ninety.

Mum wasn't there. I ran into every room, calling.

Kendall stood just inside the front door, nibbling at his thumb. 'Mum isn't coming back, is she?' he said.

'Yes, she is! As soon as she can. She'll phone us any minute now, because she'll know we're home from school.'

I put the mobile on the table. We looked and looked and looked at it.

'I expect she's having her tea,' I said. 'We'll have *our* tea, shall we?'

I opened the last tin of baked beans and made some toast. The bread had gone a little mouldy but I picked off the blue bits. I needn't have bothered. Kendall just fiddled about with his beans, spearing them on his fork one at a time, licking them and then lining them up on his plate. He didn't even touch his toast.

For once in my life I didn't feel like eating either. I could barely swallow my cup of tea. I kept watching the mobile. The battery was getting low. I didn't know if you could still take calls while it was recharging.

I stared until my eyes watered. Why wasn't she



phoning? She knew we were waiting. She knew we were worried. Maybe the woman in the next bed wouldn't let her use her mobile.

Then I had a brilliant idea. I looked in the call register of the phone and found the number. Then I dialled it. I had to give it several goes because my hands were trembling.

'Hello?'

I took a deep breath. 'Hello. Look, you don't know me. I'm Lola Rose, the daughter of the lady in the bed next to you. Oh please, can I speak to her?'

'Sorry?'

I wondered if I'd got the wrong number. 'I'm Victoria Luck's daughter. She's in hospital with you.'

'Oh right! I'm sorry, dear, I didn't quite get you at first. What's the matter?'

'I want to speak to my mum!'

'Well, darling, I can't help you.'

'Oh *please*, just for a minute. Couldn't you pass the phone over?'

'But I'm not in the hospital. I came home this morning.'

'Oh! But – but my mum hasn't come home. What's happened to her?'

'She'll be fine, dear, I'm sure. She was only having her op this morning.'

'She said she'd come home.'

'No pet, not today. She won't be up to it.'

'But is she all right? The operation went OK? She is better now?'



'I don't know, dear. She hadn't even gone up to theatre when I left. Look, get your dad or grandma to ring the hospital, they'll know.'

'Right. Yes. Well, thank you,' I said, and I touched the END CALL button.

Kendall was looking at me, biting hard at his thumb.

'She's fine, I'm sure she is,' I said. I cleared my throat, sank my head down into my shoulders, and spoke from right inside my chest. 'Do I sound old, Kendall?' I growled.

'Are you being a monster?' Kendall asked anxiously.

'I'm trying to sound like a grown-up,' I said.

I practised my voice ringing Directory Enquiries. I wrote the hospital number on the back of my hand and then rang. A lady at the other end said the name of the hospital.

'Can I speak to Victoria Luck, please?' I said. I spoke so deep down in my chest that I had to repeat myself twice before she understood.

'Which ward is she on?'

'I – I don't know which ward.' I didn't want to say the word but I didn't have any choice. 'It's the cancer ward.'

'It'll probably be Florence. I'll put you through.'

I breathed out, my hand over my pounding heart. After a long time someone answered on Florence Ward.

'Can I speak to Victoria Luck?' I asked, my throat hurting.

'Who's speaking, please?'



I didn't know what to say. Her mother? Her sister? 'Her friend.'

It was the wrong decision.

'Well, I'm sorry, I'm afraid it's not possible.'

'But I'm grown up, honestly.'

'I'm afraid we don't use the ward phones for friends.'

'Can't you just tell me if she's all right? Please!'

'I suggest you contact Mrs Luck's husband and ask him,' she said.

'Well, you can suggest all you like, Miss Snotnose Meaniepants, but Dad doesn't know and I wouldn't ring him even if he did,' I shouted and then switched the mobile off.

Kendall blinked at me. I wondered if I could coach him till he sounded like Dad. I knew it was hopeless.

I tried to think of all the possibilities. I could go upstairs and ask Andy to ring for me. Though Andy and Steve weren't speaking to us. And if they knew Kendall and I were on our own they'd maybe tell someone.

I could try to find Jake. But I didn't know where he was living now.

I could go along the road and ask Harpreet's dad to ring for me. He'd help. But Harpreet's mum would *definitely* report us.

'I don't know what to *do*,' I wailed. I slumped on the floor, my head on my knees. I could feel my blood beating, even ticking in my eyelids, Mum-Mum-Mum-Mum-Mum.

'Are you crying?' Kendall whispered.



I didn't answer. I kept my face hidden. I could hear Kendall breathing noisily above me. He nudged me with his shoe.

'Lola Rose?'

I didn't feel like Lola Rose. I didn't even feel like Jayni. I was withering away into no one.

I wanted Mum so badly. I had to bite my lips to stop myself calling for her. What if she wasn't all right? What if the operation had gone wrong? What if she'd died?

'You *are* crying,' said Kendall.

'I'm not. I just need to know if Mum's all right.'

'Let's go and find her then,' said Kendall.

I thought about it. Mum had said we mustn't. But we had to know. We couldn't just wait day after day.



# Seventeen



# Hospital

‘OK. We’ll go to the hospital,’ I said. ‘We’ll find Mum and see how she is.’

I wiped my eyes, stuffed Kendall into his jacket, tucked George under his arm, and then we set off. I didn’t have enough money for a minicab so we went to the bus stop.

I asked the driver how to get to the hospital. He said he didn’t have a clue, it wasn’t on his route. But an old woman waiting at the front said she’d been sent to the eye clinic there, and we needed to get out at the flyover and change to a number 88. She made me sit down beside her and pulled



Kendall right onto her lap. He fidgeted tensely. She clasped him tightly round the tummy. He can't stand his tummy being touched. I hoped he wasn't going to make a fuss.

She was trying to be kind but she kept asking nosy questions. I made up this whole story about visiting our sick granny, our mum meeting us at the hospital. Kendall frowned.

'Keep still, Mr Fidget-bottom,' said the old lady.

Kendall slumped sideways, whispering to George.

The bus ride lasted for ever but we got to the fly-over at last. The old lady waved to both of us. I waved back, trying to look grateful, but Kendall ducked his head.

'I didn't like her,' he said. 'I could feel her knicker elastic through her skirt. Yuck!' He shuddered. 'She's not our gran, is she?'

'Of course not. We haven't *got* a gran.'

'But you said we had.' Kendall sighed. 'You keep telling stories. I can't remember who we've got and who we haven't.'

'We haven't got anyone except you and me and Mum. And we're going to see Mum now. It will be a lovely surprise for her.'

'Is that true or is that another story?'

'It's true as true as true,' I said over and over.

I chanted it on the 88 bus all the way to the hospital. It was a huge place. It took us ages even to find our way across the car park. A man at the entrance told us we couldn't come in without an adult. I said quick as a wink we were with our dad



but he was still trying to find somewhere to park. He'd sent us ahead to buy our mum some flowers from the gift shop. The man nodded and let us in, but he watched as we squeaked along the polished floor in our trainers.

'We'll really buy Mum some flowers,' I said.

'How did you know to come out with all that stuff?' Kendall hissed.

'I'm just inventive, I suppose.'

My inventions meant we spent nearly all our money on a bunch of flowers that already looked a bit droopy. I told Kendall it was the thought that counted.

We got in a lift, having to squash up against the wall because a lady in a bed on wheels was already inside. She looked very ill. Every time the lift jerked she groaned. Kendall slipped his hand into mine. The nurse pushing the bed gave us a smile.

'Where are you off to, kids?' she asked.

'We're going to see our mum.'

'Where's Dad?'

'He's up there already,' I said.

I seemed to be inventing multiple dads – in the car park, in the ward. I had it all worked out in my head that Dad could also be in the gents toilet or feeding our baby sister or held up talking to a neighbour on another ward.

I was all set to lie until my tongue turned black but I didn't have to say a thing when we got to Florence Ward. There were two nurses sharing a bunch of grapes in a little side room but they didn't spot us.



We hurried past bed after bed, looking for Mum. Some of the women were lying down looking grey like the lady in the lift. Some were sitting chatting to their visitors, eating chocolates and opening cards. Some were shuffling up and down the ward in their dressing gowns, attached to weird pull-along drips.

‘What are those bag things for?’ Kendall asked.

‘It’s to make them better.’

‘Mum won’t have one, will she?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Where is Mum?’

‘She’ll be just up here,’ I said hoarsely.

The Voice of Doom was shouting in my head. I saw an empty bed stripped of its covers. I stopped still, staring at it.

‘Ouch, your nails are digging in,’ Kendall said.

Then he pulled away from me. ‘Mum!’ He went charging down to the end of the ward.

I blundered after him, looking around wildly. Then I saw her too, her blonde hair fanned out on her pillow. She had her head turned to the wall so we couldn’t see her face. The bedclothes were right up over her shoulders. She was lying very still.

‘Mum?’ said Kendall.

‘She’s asleep,’ I said. I put my hand on Mum’s shoulder and shook her gently. ‘Mum?’

She mumbled something and tried to pull the covers up over her head.

‘Mum! It’s us, Lola Rose and Kendall.’

Mum opened her eyes. She looked at us blearily.



I wondered if she'd forgotten our new names. I bent right up close so that my lips were against her ear.

'It's Jayni and Kenny, Mum,' I whispered.

'Hello,' she said. She didn't sound particularly pleased to see us.

'How are you, Mum?' I asked.

'Bloody terrible,' she said.

She sounded as if she had the worst hangover in the world – but she still sounded like herself. She wasn't lying back, all grey and groaning. Though she did groan when Kendall nuzzled up to her for a cuddle.

'Mind out! It's *sore*!'

Kendall froze. 'Have they chopped your boobie right off, Mum?' he asked.

'Christ, I hope not,' said Mum, scrabbling under the covers. 'No, I'm all here under the bandages. They've hacked at it, they've hacked under my arm too. He's a bloody butcher, that Mr Key.'

'But it's to make you better, Mum. You are better now, aren't you?' I said.

'I don't know. I don't *care*. I just want to go to sleep.' She tried to burrow back down.

I tapped her shoulder. 'So will you come home tomorrow, Mum?'

'Look, I'll try – but at the moment I can't even get up to go to the loo, let alone get myself all the way home.'

'But – but what are we going to do, Mum? We haven't got any money left. We spent the last of it on your flowers.'



I laid them on the pillow beside her. Mum looked at them.

‘That was a bit stupid then. Look, they’re wilting already.’

I swallowed hard. ‘I’m sorry, Mum. But what *are* we going to do?’

Mum’s eyes were closing. ‘Look, ask your dad,’ she murmured.

‘Dad? Mum, wake up! We don’t live with Dad any more, remember?’

Mum moaned. ‘Oh God,’ she said.

She started crying. She didn’t make any noise but tears leaked out of her closed eyelids. Kendall started crying too, his mouth puckered. I was scared someone might call a nurse.

‘Don’t cry, Mum,’ I said. My throat was so tight it hurt to talk. ‘It’s OK.’

‘It’s not OK. Oh God, I’m so useless. Maybe you kids would be better off in care than stuck with me.’

‘No, we wouldn’t! You’re a lovely mum. You can’t help being sick. Don’t you cry now. We’ll manage. I’ll think of something.’

Mum’s face contorted.

‘What is it, Mum? Is it the pain?’

‘I can’t stand it when you’re so bloody *brave*,’ Mum sobbed. ‘I’m sorry, kids. I’ve screwed everything up.’

‘No you haven’t. You’re the best mum in the whole world and you’re going to get better ever so quick and we’ll stay lucky lucky lucky.’

I went on talking to her like she was my little



girl, stroking her soft hair. She sighed, snuggled down and went to sleep. I stood still, feeling her shoulders rise at each breath. I told myself that I didn't care about anything else, just so long as she was alive.

Kendall snuffled behind me. He had one hand between his legs and a desperate expression. I didn't get him to the loo in time.

'My trousers are all wet,' Kendall wailed.

'Never mind. It's getting dark outside. No one will notice.'

'Are we going home now?'

'That's right.' I gave him a big smile. I was Lola Rose. I'd get us home somehow, even though we didn't have any money.

We waited for the first bus and got on. I opened my purse and then looked astonished to find it empty. I gave a little gasp and told the bus driver that my mum had given me two pounds for the bus journey and now they weren't there.

'Spent it on sweets, have you?' he said, but then he grinned. 'Go on, kids, hop on.'

The second bus driver wasn't anywhere near as kind. He said we'd have to fill out a special form with our name and address. I got very worried but a lady with a lot of shopping standing behind us said, 'Oh for God's sake, *I'll* pay for them' – and she did.

We both said thank you very much. She gave us a little lecture about being out late by ourselves and didn't our mother know?

'Our mum's in hospital,' said Kendall.



She looked at his tear-stained face. 'Oh dear, I'm so sorry,' she said.

So we got all the way home for nothing. It was very late when we got back. Kendall was starving hungry. So was I. I looked at the last few slices of bread in the packet but they were bluer than ever and smelt funny. Kendall opened his mouth hopefully, like a little bird.

'No, it's gone bad. You'll get a tummy ache if you eat it.'

'I want to eat *something*,' said Kendall.

I thought hard. 'Wait here.'

I went downstairs and knocked on Miss Parker's door. Her television was blaring but she didn't answer. I tried calling through her letter box.

'There's nobody in,' she called, which was a pretty daft thing to do. Still, she *was* daft, so what did I expect? She wouldn't come to her door. I gave up on her and went upstairs to Steve and Andy's.

I felt sick with nerves. Mum had called Steve and Andy a lot of bad names. Maybe they'd yell rude things at me when they saw who was knocking. I prayed it would be Andy who came to the door. He was so much nicer than Steve.

It was Steve. He raised his eyebrows when he saw me. He didn't say anything at all, just folded his arms.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Steve,' I said.

'You don't bother me, though I seem to bother you, judging by all the names I get called.'



'I didn't ever call you names.'

'No, but your mum certainly came out with a mouthful.'

'I know. I'm sorry. She's sorry too. She was just upset because of that Jake.'

'I haven't seen him around recently.'

'He's gone.'

'Oh dear.' He didn't sound very sympathetic. 'I bet your mum's in a bit of a state.'

'Yes. She is. So she didn't get to the shops today and I wonder – I know it's a bit of a cheek, but could we borrow a carton of milk?'

Steve's eyebrows shot up further. 'So she's sent you on this little begging mission?'

'She's not feeling very well.'

'Mm,' said Steve.

'Who is it, Steve?' Andy called from inside their flat.

'It's little Lola Lollipop from downstairs,' said Steve. 'Come to beg a pint of milk off us.'

'Borrow,' I said. 'We'll pay you back when . . . whenever.'

'Hi, Lola Rose,' said Andy, gently pushing Steve to one side. 'You OK, sweetheart?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

Andy still looked concerned. 'Come in for a minute,' he said. 'Would you like a cup of tea? A Coke and crisps?'

My mouth watered at the thought. 'I can't really leave Kendall,' I said.

'Isn't your mum home?' said Steve, narrowing his eyes.



'Yes! Yes, but she's in bed, not very well. I want to make *her* a cup of tea, see, so if I could just borrow that milk?'

'Sure,' said Andy. He brought me a big two-pint carton, plus a couple of cans of Coke and a big bag of Kettle crisps. 'Take these back for you and Kendall.'

'Oh thank you, Andy, thank you!'

'What about breakfast? Has Mum got something in?'

'Well, the bread's gone a bit stale . . .'

He gave me half their loaf *and* a big packet of muesli.

'You're so kind.'

'Yeah, he's Mr Soft Touch,' said Steve, but he didn't sound too cross about it.

Kendall and I devoured the Coke and crisps. I felt we should save half as it was such a big bag but we were so hungry we ended up munching every scrap and licking out the bag. Kendall drank his Coke too quickly and got the hiccups. He found this uproariously funny at first. Then he got tired and tetchy.

'Stop me!' he begged.

I tried making him sip water but he hiccuped in mid swallow and choked. Even that didn't stop him. I knew you were supposed to be able to frighten someone out of hiccups so I tried creeping up on him and going boo. This didn't work either.

It seemed so stupid trying to frighten him when we were in such a scary situation already. The Voice of Doom was laughing its head off.



## Eighteen



## Auntie Barbara

Kendall was still hiccuping when I put him to bed. I made him lie on his tummy and then I patted his back.

‘I used to do this when you were a little baby,’ I said. ‘It always made you burp.’

‘Me a lickle baby now,’ Kendall lisped. ‘Burpy burpy burp.’ He made George jump up and down. ‘Poor George. He’s got the burpy hiccups too.’

‘I’m not surprised he’s got hiccups. Tell him to stop snacking on poor little Bobby Blue Bear.’

‘He gets hungry,’ said Kendall. ‘And Bobby *likes* being eaten.’



‘Well, tell George he’d better not start on Pinkie. I don’t want shark slobber all over *my* bear.’

Kendall giggled, hiccuped one last time, and fell fast asleep. I took my clothes off and lay down beside him. I’d put Kendall to sleep. I’d put Mum to sleep. I wanted someone to come along and put *me* to sleep.

There were too many worries circling round and round my head. I knew Mum couldn’t come home tomorrow. Maybe not even the day after. And when she did come home she’d probably still feel poorly. She wouldn’t be able to work for a while. So what were we going to do for money?

I couldn’t keep begging food from Steve and Andy. I couldn’t think of any way I could earn money myself. You had to be thirteen before you could do a newspaper round. I’d seen a few kids helping out in the market, but they were all boys. I could filch a few bruised bananas and rotten apples as the market closed up each day but that wouldn’t be enough to feed the three of us. I could hang about outside McDonald’s and grab left-over French fries and half-eaten burgers. I could sidle round Sainsbury’s and pinch a packet here, a tin there . . . ?

No, I couldn’t. I didn’t have the bottle. What if I got caught? It was wrong to steal. But Mum needed good food to build her strength up. She’d looked so *little* lying there in hospital. What if I had to watch her losing weight day after day? What if she died?



What would Kendall and I do then? Would they make us go back to Dad? He'd be kind to Kendall but I wasn't his little Jayni any more. I was big enough for him to batter.

I moved my jaw gingerly. It still sometimes ached from that one punch. I couldn't take it like Mum. I was a terrible baby. I'd cry, and that always made Dad madder.

I curled up small and felt for Pinkie bear. I hugged her hard against my chest. I thought of Dad's fists. Tears trickled onto Pinkie's fur. I wished she could grow bigger, big as my pillow, big as the bed. I wanted her to lift me up and cradle me against her pink fur.

Auntie Barbara had given her to me when I was born. Maybe Auntie Barbara looked like a giant Pinkie without her clothes.

I clutched Pinkie tight.

*Auntie Barbara!*

I couldn't remember her properly. I last saw her at Grandma's funeral when I was younger than Kendall. Mum talked about her size so much she seemed like a character in a cartoon. It was weird remembering she was real.

Would she help us? I knew Grandad would have nothing to do with us. But maybe Auntie Barbara was softer? She must like us a little bit if she sent us special teddies. She used to send books too, before we moved to the flats. I remembered a big book about an elephant and one about a little bear and a funny one about jelly with a hole in the pages. I'd loved those picture books but



Kendall tore them all when he was a toddler. Auntie Barbara hadn't sent us any presents for years. But maybe she simply didn't have our address.

I didn't have *her* address. I couldn't ask Mum. She'd go mad if she thought I was going begging to the sister she couldn't stand. I wondered why Mum didn't like her. Maybe Auntie Barbara had been really mean to her. But she wasn't just Mum's sister, she was my auntie. Aunties were meant to help you, weren't they?

Harpreet had heaps of aunties. They made a big fuss of her and invited her to tea and bought her special sweets and hair slides and bangles. Maybe my Auntie Barbara wouldn't mind if I asked her to send a few fivers to tide us over until Mum could work. She must have quite a lot of money if she lived in Grandad's pub.

I couldn't remember the name. It was some sort of fish. The Cod? No, that sounded stupid. The Salmon? That wasn't right either. The *Trout*, that was it! And I knew the town, even if I didn't know the street.

I sat up in bed and rang Directory Enquiries on Mum's mobile. I wrote the number down and then dialled it quickly before I could change my mind. The phone rang and rang. I hoped Grandad wouldn't come to the phone. I was about to give up – but then someone answered. A woman.

'The Trout. Can I help you? Though it's after closing time—'



'I'm sorry. I forgot it was so late. Can I speak to – to Barbara, please?'

'Speaking.'

'Oh! Well, you don't really know me but – but I think you're my auntie.'

'Oh, good lord! Is that Jayni?'

'Yes.'

'Oh Jayni, how lovely that you phoned!'

'You don't mind?'

'Of course not! I've been hoping and hoping you would all get in touch. What's happened, Jayni? Are you all right?'

'Well. Sort of. It's just . . .' I didn't know where to start.

'Let me have a word with your mum,' said Auntie Barbara.

'Well, that's just it. She's not here.'

'Where is she?'

'In hospital.'

'Oh God. Did your dad catch her then?'

I sat up in bed, startled. How did Auntie Barbara know we'd run away?

'No, she's had to go to hospital to have a lump taken out. She said she'd come straight back but she didn't. So we went to see her and she's all sleepy but I *think* she's all right. We're back home now, Kenny and me, but we haven't got any money left. I don't know what we're going to do for food. We've got some muesli but I don't think Kenny will eat it. The bread's gone mouldy so I was wondering if you could send us some money, Auntie Barbara, just for a few days. We'll pay you



back the minute Mum gets work. She doesn't know I'm phoning and I'd be ever so grateful if you don't tell Grandad because I know he doesn't like us but I thought you might just be kind enough to—'

'Jayni! Let me get a word in edgeways, sweetheart! Now calm down. I'm going to help, don't worry. Hang on while I get a pen and paper. Then you can give me your address.'

'Oh Auntie Barbara!' I said, and I burst into tears. She sounded so *nice*.

I cried so hard I could barely stammer out the address. Auntie Barbara repeated it back to me to make sure she'd got it right.

'There now, Jayni, don't cry, pet. It's going to be all right. You can count on me. Now, have you got the door locked, you and Kenny? Then I should try to go to sleep now. Don't worry any more. I'll get everything sorted out, you'll see.'

So I went to sleep, clutching Pinkie to my chest, Kendall breathing softly by my side.

Then Kendall woke me up, shaking my shoulder and tugging my hair.

'Leave off, Kendall.'

'There's someone knocking at the door, Lola Rose! It's the middle of the night!'

'What? It'll be someone for Steve and Andy. One of their mates will have been at a party.'

'They're calling out for Jayni and Kenny.' Kendall paused. 'Is that still us?'

'Oh help!'

I flew to the window, thinking it was Dad. I saw



a very large woman peering up at me in the moonlight, clutching great carrier bags. 'Auntie Barbara!'

I ran down the stairs, tripping and nearly falling in my eagerness. Miss Parker poked her head round her door. She had a hairnet pulled right down to her eyebrows.

'I'm telling the housing people on you,' she said. 'Waking a body at all hours! It's disgraceful.'

'I'm sorry, really sorry, but it's my *auntie*,' I said, hurrying towards the front door.

'I don't care if it's little green men from Mars, they shouldn't come knocking in the middle of the night!' said Miss Parker.

I took no notice, fiddling with the bolts on the door. 'Don't go, Auntie Barbara, I'm coming!' I called.

I got the door open at last. Auntie Barbara dropped the bags and held out her arms to me. I fell against her.

Whenever I hugged Mum hard she always teetered on her heels and said, 'Careful, you'll knock me over.'

No one could knock Auntie Barbara over. She didn't budge an inch. She stayed still, like a well-upholstered sofa, while I leant against her and cried on the big soft cushion of her chest.

A small fist pummelled at my bottom.

'Do we know her?' Kendall asked.

I stopped snivelling and stepped back, reaching for Kendall. 'Of course we do! This is our auntie. Auntie Barbara, this is Kenny.'



'I'm Kendall,' he said.

Auntie Barbara stooped, arms open. Kendall backed rapidly.

'I don't hug strange ladies,' he said.

'Kendall!' I hissed.

Auntie Barbara laughed. 'Quite right, Kendall. And they don't come any stranger than me.'

She *did* look strange. She had long blonde hair, thick and soft, like Mum's, but Auntie Barbara's was really long. She wore it caught up and coiled and twisted into a bun at the top of her head, though little tendrils escaped and hung down like earrings. She had a very pretty face with Mum's big blue eyes. She didn't wear any make-up. Her skin was very pink as if she spent a lot of time scrubbing it. If you chopped Auntie Barbara off at the neck like one of those old hairstyling doll heads she'd win any beauty contest. But things started to go weird past her shoulders. There was just so much of her. She was the BIGGEST LADY I'd ever seen. She wasn't just fat, she was vast, so massive she seemed a different species altogether.

She wasn't wibbly-wobbly like the lovely maid at the hotel. She looked like she was made of pink marble, a great monument. She was wearing a vast silk top in a wonderful deep purple, with a matching wrap-around skirt. It could have wrapped round Kendall and me a dozen times. Her toenails were painted purple too, shining in her silver sandals. I wondered at first how she could stretch down over her huge stomach to



reach her toes, but she proved amazingly agile for such a large lady. She bounded up the stairs to our flat, swinging the great bags.

Miss Parker watched, open-mouthed. 'Who's she when she's at home – the Queen of Sheba?'

Auntie Barbara laughed and gave her a regal wave. She had a great silver ring on either hand and a huge chunk of amber hung on a thick silver chain. It was easy enough to imagine an amber crown on top of her coiled hair.

Kendall and I followed in her wake. Her bottom was enormous above us. Kendall's eyes met mine. We struggled not to giggle.

Steve and Andy peered down from their landing above, in little shortie Japanese dressing gowns. Auntie Barbara waved to them too. When we got inside our front door, Auntie Barbara said, 'I wonder if they realized we could see right up their dressing gowns!'

We could all giggle together.

'Right, Jayni, where's the kettle? I'm dying for a cup of tea. And biscuits.'

'I'm afraid we haven't got any.'

'I have,' said Auntie Barbara. She opened one of the carriers and brought out tea bags, chocolate Hobnobs, a walnut cake, fairy cakes, doughnuts, a multipack of sandwiches, bananas, apples and *a giant bar of Cadbury's chocolate*. 'I think we could all do with a bit of sustenance,' she said, smiling. 'I went to the all-night supermarket on the way.'

'How did you know I like that chocolate, Auntie Barbara?' I asked her, awed.



'I like it,' said Auntie Barbara. 'I've been known to eat a whole bar by myself.'

'Not a *giant* bar?'

'You bet a giant bar,' said Auntie Barbara, bustling around making tea as if she'd lived in our flat all her life.

'But aren't you worried that—?'

'That it'll make me fat?' said Auntie Barbara, she hooted with laughter. 'Bit late in the day to start worrying!'

She sat herself down on Mum's sofa bed, filling it as if it was her own armchair. Kendall and I sat cross-legged in front of her. We had cups of tea too, and started on Auntie Barbara's picnic. It tasted wonderful. Even Kendall ate heaps, properly too, swallowing the crusts on his sandwiches and eating the sponge as well as the icing on his fairy cake.

Auntie Barbara ate the most though. It was plain she could out-eat anyone. She saw me watching every mouthful she took. 'I'm a very bad example, Jayni,' she said. 'It's very unhealthy to eat as much as me and get so terribly fat.'

'Then why do you do it?' Kendall asked.

'Don't be so rude, Kendall!' I said, nudging him.

'No, it's a perfectly sensible question. Shame is, I haven't got any answers. I eat because I'm greedy. I like food.'

'I like food too,' I said, biting my lip.

'Don't look so worried. I'm sure you won't take after me,' said Auntie Barbara, happily



biting into a big éclair, cream oozing everywhere.

‘I don’t take after Mum,’ I said, reaching for an éclair too.

‘I don’t think you need take after anyone. You’re yourself. Unique. The one and only Jayni.’

‘She’s not Jayni,’ said Kendall.

Auntie Barbara wiped the cream from her mouth. ‘Who is she then, Kenny? Whoops, sorry, Kendall.’

‘I call myself Lola Rose now,’ I said shyly. ‘And Kenny’s Kendall, like he said, and Mum’s Victoria Luck.’

Auntie Barbara nodded. ‘Are these new names to stop your dad tracking you down?’

‘How do you *know*?’

‘Because he came barging into my pub weeks ago, effing and blinding and generally doing his nut. He said your mum’s gone off with a footballer. *Has* she?’

‘No! She stopped seeing him ages and ages ago. No, we had to do a runner because my dad hit my mum, and then he went for me.’

‘My dad didn’t hit *me*. My dad said I’m his little champ,’ Kendall said, sticking his chin up. ‘He’s the big champ and I’m the little champ.’

‘Little chump, more like,’ I said.

‘You shut up, Lola Rose,’ said Kendall, clenching his fist.

‘I think Lola Rose is an absolutely lovely name,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘Did your mum think that up?’



'I chose it myself,' I said proudly. 'You won't tell Dad, will you, Auntie Barbara?'

'What do you think I am, daft?' said Auntie Barbara. 'I had a few sharp words with him.'

'He didn't hit *you*, did he?'

'I'd like to see him try,' said Auntie Barbara, flexing her big arms. 'I don't think any man would dare take me on. Even your grandad thought better of it once I'd got to a certain age. He had a really nasty temper too, just like your dad. He didn't mellow in old age either. He was a crabby old beggar up until the day he died. In fact he died in mid rant, yelling at me because I was changing the beer barrels—'

'So he's dead, our grandad.'

'A couple of years ago. I tried to let your mum know but she'd moved. She isn't a girl for keeping in touch. We didn't really get on when we were kids, your mum and me. We were so different, chalk and cheese. We had this awful row over something – and I got really mad at your mum. But that was long ago. I'm not mad at her now – and I've *never* been mad at you two. I'm so happy you phoned me, Jayni. Sorry, Lola Rose.'

'How did you get here so quick? There aren't any buses this early, are there?'

'I drove, sweetheart. I'll pop back down to the car in a minute and get my case.'

'Your case?'

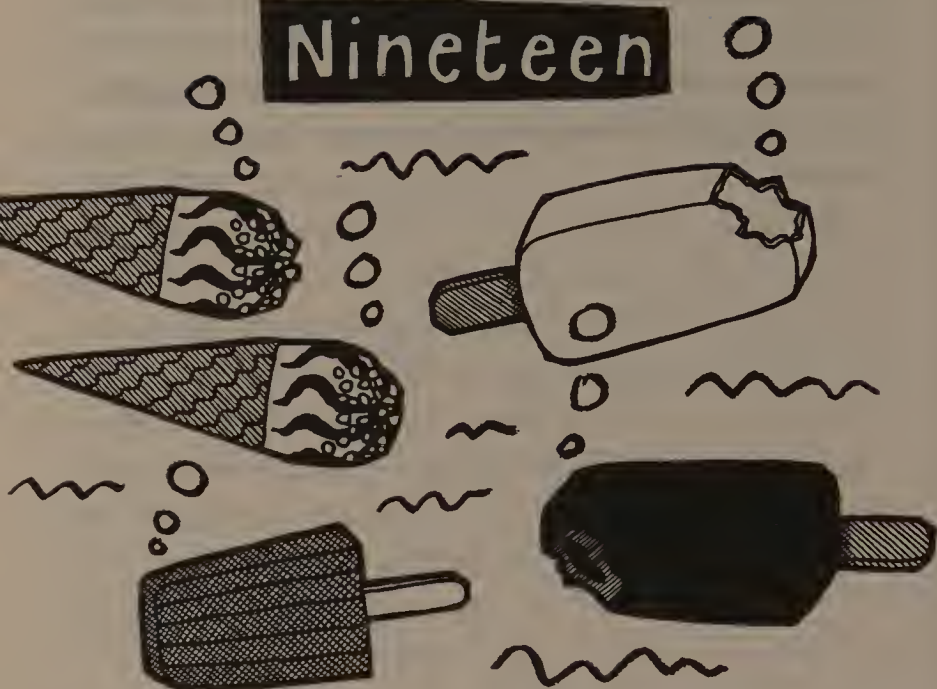
'I'm staying to look after you, darling. Until your mum gets better. I've got it all organized at the pub. I've got this lovely Australian couple



working as bar staff, and they're going to manage things for me till I get back. You didn't think I'd just lob a few pounds and a packet of biscuits at you and then disappear? I'm your auntie. You're *family*.



# Nineteen



## Treats

'I'll go and see your mum this morning,' said Auntie Barbara.

'I'm coming too,' I said.

'And me,' said Kendall.

'Will it upset him?' Auntie Barbara mouthed.

'Probably,' I mouthed back.

I was worried *Mum* might be upset. Upset with me for calling Auntie Barbara.

We went to the hospital together, Auntie Barbara striding confidently down the ward, Kendall and I scuttling along behind her.

Mum was lying on her back, looking towards



us. Her face screwed up. 'Oh Gawd, what are *you* doing here?' she said rudely.

Auntie Barbara blinked – but then she laughed cheerfully. 'Good to see you too, Nikki,' she said, and bent down to give her a kiss.

I was sure Mum would wriggle away. She didn't. Her good arm hooked round Auntie Barbara's neck and she hugged her hard.

'So how are you?' said Auntie Barbara.

'Fine!' said Mum. She still had great wads of bandage on her breast and under her arm. Her face was ghostly pale without her make-up and her hair hung in limp strings.

She pulled me close for a hug too, whispering in my ear. 'Has Jake been in touch?'

'No,' I said wretchedly.

Mum sighed as if it was somehow my fault.

'Lola Rose has been a little star, Nik. She's been so responsible and grown up.'

'Yeah yeah yeah. Takes after you then, doesn't she?' said Mum.

'Kendall's been brilliant too,' said Auntie Barbara. She was laying it on a bit thick now. Kendall had been a right pain.

Mum just gave a little snort.

'Mum?' said Kendall. He climbed up onto the bed, wanting to see her face. He frowned at her. 'You look horrid, Mum.'

'Thanks a bunch,' Mum muttered, pushing him away. 'Get off the bed, Kendall, I don't want you breathing all over me.'

Kendall slid off the bed, tears in his eyes. He



looked at me to make it better. I knew he hadn't meant to be unkind. He was worried that Mum still looked so ill.

'I don't like you,' he said, his lip trembling.

'I don't like you either,' Mum said, shutting her eyes.

'I don't want you for my mum any more,' Kendall said, tears spilling. 'I want Auntie Barbara.'

I covered his mouth up quick. 'He doesn't mean it, Mum,' I said hurriedly.

Maybe he did. He thought Auntie Barbara was wonderful. She knew all about sharks for a start. She'd been on holiday to America and seen the island where they made that old movie *Jaws*, the one where the shark chews people's legs off when they're swimming in the shallows.

Auntie Barbara got it out the video shop for Kendall that evening. He watched it sitting on her vast lap, George clutched to his chest. Auntie Barbara was worried that he might be frightened but he didn't seem to mind a bit. He only got upset at the end, when the shark died.

I couldn't watch any of it. I sat cross-legged with my back to the telly, working on my scrap-book, a pile of magazines by my side. I was doing a 'Favourite Food' page for our family – Mum, Auntie Barbara, Kendall and me. It was difficult to balance the page. Auntie Barbara had heaps and heaps and heaps, I had lots, Mum had hardly anything if you didn't count wine and ciggies, and Kendall just had a red ice lolly.



‘Did you see sharks when you were on holiday, Auntie Barbara?’ Kendall asked.

‘Not swimming in the sea. I saw whales though, lots of humpback whales. I’ve got photos at home, I’ll show you sometime. I went out in this special whale-watching boat. The whales like to eat plankton so they blow out this sticky stuff and all the little fishy things get stuck and then the whales come along and go chomp chomp chomp.’

Auntie Barbara mimed it for us. Kendall did his best to imitate her and blew sticky stuff out of *his* nose by mistake.

‘Have you ever been to Disneyland, Auntie Barbara?’ I asked. ‘My friend Harpreet has and she says it’s the best place in the whole world.’

‘I haven’t ever been there. Still, maybe we could go some day?’

‘You mean, you and Kendall and me? And Mum? But how could we afford it? The lottery money’s all gone.’

‘I could treat us,’ said Auntie Barbara.

‘Are you rich?’ Kendall asked excitedly.

‘Not *rich*. But I’m reasonably well off, I suppose, now your grandad’s passed the pub on to me. I don’t spend much on clothes and posh cars and stuff, but I do like to go on good holidays. I went to Thailand last year. It’s a fantastic country and lovely lovely people. I’ve got this smashing Thai family who do the meals in my pub now. Have you kids ever had Thai food?’

‘We have Chinese takeaway. I like chicken chow mein,’ I said.



'You wait till you try Thai. It's truly scrumptious.'

'Truly's in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*,' said Kendall, proud because he'd remembered.

'We had the video at our old home,' I said.

'It's a play now too, with a real car that flies right up in the air. We could go sometime if you like,' said Auntie Barbara.

We stared at her. It was as if she was taking *us* in a magic car, flying us out of our own dull life to a dazzling magic land where everything seemed possible.

She took us up to town on Sunday morning and said we could go anywhere we wanted. Kendall chose the aquarium, surprise, surprise. Auntie Barbara was very understanding when I explained I couldn't go in. She sat me on a bench overlooking the river.

'You sure you'll be OK?'

'Yeah, of course,' I said.

I wasn't. The sharks were shut up in the aquarium but I couldn't shut all my other worries up. They swam round and round my head. I felt really guilty that Kendall and I were having a good time with Auntie Barbara while Mum was stuck in hospital, still not better. She'd looked so small when we'd said goodbye. I was scared she'd shrink every time we went to see her, until one day she'd just be a hank of hair, a few bones and a bandage.

I was scared I might start crying so I tried to distract myself. I gathered up some sweet



wrappers and started tearing them up and sticking them with spit onto my arm like tattoos. I'd seen a picture of a snail made out of coloured paper at school so I copied that. Then I did a butterfly and a ladybird and a rose.

Auntie Barbara sucked in her breath when she saw. I thought she'd make me pick all the papers off and give me a lecture about licking dirty bits of paper. Mum would have. But Auntie Barbara held my arm up and inspected it closely, smiling.

'Do you like Matisse?' she said.

I'd never even heard of Matisse so she took us to the Tate Modern. Kendall moaned and said it was going to be boring-boring-boring, but when we'd walked all along the river bank to this huge gallery he ran around all over the place and no one seemed to mind.

There was a special Matisse exhibition. I wasn't sure I liked his work at first. All the paintings were a bit squiggly and didn't look real though I liked the bright colours. Auntie Barbara liked a picture of a big lady lying back on a sofa in funny floppy trousers. She said she'd have a go at making some similar trousers for herself. She makes most of her clothes because she's so huge she can't find anything in the shops.

'I'll make you a pair of stripy trousers too, Lola Rose,' said Auntie Barbara. She saw the look of horror on my face. 'Joke!' she said, laughing.

We turned a corner – and there was the school snail picture, absolutely huge, bigger than Auntie Barbara.



'It's a collage!' I said.

'Do you know something? I think *your* collage work knocks spots off old Matisse. I love that food picture you did last night. Hey, talking of food, I'm starving! Let's go and find the café.'

We all had sausages and mash. Kendall turned his sausages into sharks and made them swim in the mashy sea but then he ate them all up. I ate mine too, and then a big strawberry cheesecake, but on the bus to the hospital I started to feel sick. Kendall went quiet too. Auntie Barbara put her arms round us.

'Will Mum be better now?' Kendall asked.

'Let's hope so,' said Auntie Barbara – which wasn't quite the same as a straight yes.

When we got to the ward Mum was propped up on her pillows, her hair carefully brushed, her make-up pink and pretty, almost her old self.

'You *are* better, Mum!' said Kendall.

'Yeah, I'm going home tomorrow, they've promised,' said Mum.

'That's great news, Nik,' said Auntie Barbara.

'*Victoria*,' said Mum.

'Victoria Luck. Lady Luck,' I said.

'That's right, that's me,' said Mum, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes kept swivelling past all of us.

We stayed for a while, Auntie Barbara and me trying to chat to Mum, Kendall sitting on the floor muttering to George. Mum slid further and further down the bed, barely replying.

Then she suddenly sat up straight. She licked



her lips and then bared her teeth in a big smile.

I looked round. Jake was shuffling up the ward, clutching a small bunch of carnations, the sort you buy outside a garage for £2.99. Mum behaved as if he'd given her an armful of hot-house lilies. She gave him a really smoochie movie-star kiss right in front of us. Jake's mouth was all wet when he pulled away. He lifted his arm as if he wanted to wipe it. Mum was gazing up at him. His arm froze. He looked like a statue saying hello. Then he waved it awkwardly at Kendall and me.

'Hi, kids,' he said. He nodded nervously at Auntie Barbara too.

'Hi, I'm Victoria's sister,' she said.

Jake looked astonished. Auntie Barbara watched him, waiting for some crass comment. She seemed utterly composed but I saw her fingers fidgeting behind her back, digging hard at a hangnail. It must be awful – everyone always amazed that two sisters could look so different.

Jake managed to hold his tongue. Mum patted the bed, making him sit beside her. I saw her wince slightly when he sat down heavily but she didn't say a word. He could have used the bed as a trampoline and she wouldn't have complained.

'How lovely of you to come and see me, Jake,' she said, like it was a huge surprise – though I found out later she'd begged a loan of a mobile from another patient and left urgent messages at his art college.

I suppose it was good he came. Maybe he



loved Mum a little bit. Maybe he thought she was about to die and might leave him something. Not that she *had* anything. Just a suitcase of clothes, a few bits of furniture – and two kids.

Mum seemed to have forgotten all about us. She chatted non-stop to Jake, two pink smudges of rouge standing out on her pale cheeks. Jake hardly said a word. He looked relieved when Kendall edged towards him.

‘How’s my little pal, eh?’ said Jake. He picked Kendall up and plonked him on his lap. Kendall kicked his legs happily.

‘Careful!’ said Mum, frowning at Kendall.

‘Does it hurt a lot?’ Jake asked, looking stricken.

‘No, no, hardly at all. And don’t worry, I’m still all in one piece,’ said Mum, patting her bandages gingerly. ‘It’s all thanks to you, Jake darling. If you hadn’t found the little lump and made me go to the doc then I’d have been up the creek without a paddle.’

‘I want to paddle,’ said Kendall, not understanding. ‘Mum, Auntie Barbara’s taking us to the seaside to see sharks and whales and then we’re going to Disneyland.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s that whizzing past? Whoops! It’s a flying pig,’ said Mum.

Kendall lost track altogether but didn’t seem to mind. ‘Paddle paddle paddle, George and me are going to paddle,’ he sang. He kicked his legs again, pretending to paddle. He caught Mum on her side. It wasn’t her sore chest or arm but it



must have hurt. Her eyes blinked but she stayed smiling bravely.

Jake eased Kendall off his lap and stood up.

‘Where are you off to?’ said Mum.

‘I’m sorry, Vic, I’ve got to go.’

‘But you’ve only just got here!’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve things to do. You know how it is.’

Mum knew. She couldn’t bear it. She waited until he was out of sight and then started sobbing. Auntie Barbara reached out to hold her hand but she snatched it away.

‘Don’t, Nik, he’s not worth it,’ Auntie Barbara said softly.

‘How would *you* know?’ Mum sobbed.

‘Yeah. How would I?’ said Auntie Barbara. She put her arm round Kendall and me. ‘Come on, kids.’

‘Stop making such a fuss of those kids, they’re *mine*,’ Mum cried.

‘Mum’s tired,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘We’ll go now. What time do you think they’ll let you out tomorrow? I’ll come and collect you in the car.’

‘It won’t be till lunch time – and I’ll get myself home, thanks very much,’ Mum sniffed.

‘Sure, sure,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘But I’ll come at lunch time even so.’

Auntie Barbara made us both go to school on Monday, even though we argued.

‘No, I’ll need to concentrate on your mum. We’ve got some stuff to sort out. And I don’t want you to miss any more school.’



'It'll be a waste of time sitting in lessons. I won't be able to take anything in,' I said.

I was right. I kept thinking about Mum. I told Harpreet Mum was getting out of hospital. She gave me a big hug and said she was very happy for me.

'So she's better now?'

'Yes, of course she is. Or they wouldn't let her out of hospital, would they?' I said.

'That's right,' said Harpreet, patting my shoulder. 'Here, Lola Rose, Mum's put an extra bar of chocolate in my lunch box. You can have it if you like.'

I had extra everything in *my* lunch box because Auntie Barbara had packed it for me. Harpreet and I shared a wonderful feast of cream cheese and date and banana rolls, chicken salad sandwiches, vegetable chunks with their own special dip, salt and vinegar crisps, blueberry muffins, buttered fruit bread, rosy apples, cranberry juice – and a giant bar of Cadbury's chocolate.

'I'm going to get so *fat*,' Harpreet said, rubbing her flat tummy.

'I *am* fat,' I said.

'No you're not. Well, not really,' said Harpreet. 'You're bound to slim down a bit in your teens. You'll take after your mum.'

'I hope so,' I said. 'But if I don't, it's not *so* bad being fat, is it?'

'No, of course it's not bad at all,' said Harpreet comfortingly.



But when we came out of school at the end of the afternoon Harpreet stopped dead in the playground. 'Oh my goodness, look at that fat woman!' she gasped.

She put her hand over her mouth and giggled. She wasn't the only one. Half the kids were gawping and nudging each other.

'Is she someone's *mum*?' Harpreet spluttered. 'She's like an elephant! Whoever is she?'

'She's my Auntie Barbara. And you can just shut up,' I said.

I ran across the playground to the school gate where Auntie Barbara was waiting. She was wearing a blue denim shirt that could have sailed a ship. She held out her big blue arms and I rushed up and hugged her in front of everyone.

'You look lovely, Auntie Barbara. I like that shirt. It matches your eyes,' I said.

Auntie Barbara hugged me harder.

'So where's Mum? Did you go and fetch her? Why isn't she here?' I said, my heart starting to pound.

'It's OK. She's at home, resting.'

'And she's all right, really?'

'Well,' said Auntie Barbara. 'She's OK. For the moment.'

Her words clanged in my head. The Voice of Doom repeated them. *For the moment*. I needed it to be *for ever*.

Harpreet was hovering, looking at me beseechingly with her beautiful big eyes. 'I'm so sorry,' she mouthed at me.



‘Auntie Barbara, this is my friend Harpreet,’ I said.

Harpreet looked very relieved. She held out her hand politely. ‘Pleased to meet you, Auntie Barbara,’ she said. She looked at me. ‘You never said you had an auntie! Is she a real blood auntie or just a friend?’

‘I’m a real auntie *and* a friend,’ said Auntie Barbara.

We went to collect Kendall and Amandeep from their after-school club. Amandeep hung back and acted shy, sucking her thumb.

‘She can’t help being a bit babyish,’ said Kendall, taking hold of Auntie Barbara’s hand. ‘Auntie Barbara, I love you.’

‘I love you too, Kendall,’ said Auntie Barbara.

‘Will you take us to the aquarium?’

Auntie Barbara laughed but I was shocked.

‘Kendall! We’re going straight home. Mum’s back!’

‘Well, she can come too,’ said Kendall.

‘Don’t be silly, she’s not well enough yet.’

‘She’s always ill now,’ said Kendall, as if it was Mum’s fault. ‘Can’t we go to the aquarium now and see Mum after?’

‘No, it’s straight home, sweetheart, but we’ll get you a red ice lolly on the way, how about that? What about you, girls? What’s your favourite ice cream?’

I had a white Magnum and Harpreet and Amandeep both had soft Cornettos. Auntie Barbara had a double-choc Magnum. She



nibbled the chocolate off bit by bit just the way I do. She made little *Mmm* noises. I do that too.

‘We should have bought an ice cream for your mum,’ she said. ‘What does she like?’

‘She doesn’t often eat ice cream – she watches her figure,’ I said without thinking. Then I felt terrible.

‘I watch my figure too,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘I watch my figure getting bigger!’ She said it like it was a poem. Then she pointed to places on herself and said, ‘Cornetto, Cornetto, and Magnum Magnum Magnum!’

When we got to Harpreet’s house she whispered in my ear, ‘I love your Auntie Barbara, Lola Rose.’

‘I love her too,’ I whispered back.

I wished I was young enough to swing on Auntie Barbara’s hand like Kendall. He started whimpering to go to the aquarium the minute he’d finished his ice lolly.

‘Now who’s acting like a baby?’ I said crossly.

I knew why he was. I almost wished we *could* go to the wretched aquarium. I was sort of scared of seeing Mum even though I’d missed her so much.

I was scared that she’d still look really ill.

But when we let ourselves in the front door we heard Mum talking. Someone was with her. I thought it must be Jake.

It wasn’t Jake.

It was Dad.



# Twenty



## The Fight

The flat started spinning. I nearly fell over.

I heard a harsh laugh.

It *was* Dad.

No, it couldn't be Dad. He didn't know where we were. He couldn't possibly find us. He couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening. I had to be dreaming. If I closed my eyes tight and then opened them really really wide I'd wake myself up.

I closed my eyes. The flat stopped whirling. Dad's voice stopped too. It *was* a dream.

I opened my eyes wide. And there was Dad,



right in front of me, his mouth a great grin, showing all his teeth.

I gasped. Kendall cried out too. 'Dad! Dad! It's my *dad!*' he whooped.

He hurtled forwards, skinny arms elbowing me out of the way. Dad caught him and whirled him round and round. Kendall's shoes hit me hard on the head, making me reel again.

I felt hands gripping my shoulders, holding me up. Auntie Barbara.

'Did *you* call Dad?' I whispered.

She shook her head. She looked over at Mum, lying on the sofa, white jacket over her black nightie, her face a mask of make-up.

*Mum?*

I dodged past Dad and Kendall and ran to her. She put her hands up quickly to stop me.

'Careful, careful! I'm still blooming sore, like I've done ten rounds with Lennox Lewis. Hello, darling. Glad to see your mum safely home? And Dad too? Isn't it a lovely surprise, eh?'

I stared at Mum. She stared back at me, her chin up, but she couldn't quite meet my eyes.

'It's time we got together again, Jayni,' she said. 'We've all missed Dad terribly, haven't we, Kenny?'

'Yeah! Yeah! Oh, Dad, you're the greatest! Wheee!' Kendall yelled, as Dad stuck him on his shoulders. 'I'm the king of the whole world! Look, I can touch the ceiling.'

'Watch that light fitting, Kenny, you'll electrocute yourself,' said Mum.



I felt as if Mum had stuck us all into an electric socket. Fear sizzled through me, making my hair stand on end.

*Why* had she done it? We'd spent all these weeks hiding from him, taking such care to start a new life so he couldn't trace us.

I knew why. She'd been so scared in the hospital. She needed someone to make her feel good. To make her feel she still *looked* good. Jake had been useless. So she started thinking about the one man in the world who was crazy about her.

She started spinning a little fairy tale, the way she always did. She'd kid herself it would all be so different now. Dad would be shocked she'd been so ill. He'd feel really bad and want to make it up to her. He'd have missed us so much. He'd realize just how much we meant to him. So he'd come back and he'd treat Mum like a queen. He'd never ever raise his hand to her again. He'd love her and cherish her and make her feel his special babe. We'd all play Happy Families and live Happily Ever After.

Mum had done her best to turn herself into a fairy princess. She couldn't raise her bad arm but somehow she'd bent over the basin and washed her hair one-handed. She'd painted her face with elaborate care. Her eyeliner was smooth, her lips outlined without a single smudge, though her hands were shaking now. She'd shaved her legs and painted her toenails pink.



She lay back in her careful pose, her jacket hiding the bulky bandage over her breast. She wanted the fairy tale to be real. Her eyes were going blink blink blink. She was wishing it inside her head.

I wished it for her too.

Maybe it really would come true. Dad wasn't laying into us, he was all lovey-dovey.

'I've been doing my nut without you, babe,' he said, sitting down beside Mum. Kenny stayed squealing on his shoulder. 'I couldn't credit it when you played that vanishing trick on me. I thought OK, you were teaching me a lesson, you'd stay away a couple of days, but you really meant it, didn't you, darling?' His voice thickened.

Mum snuggled up to him, touching his face with her carefully painted fingers. 'Not really, Jay, sweetheart. I don't know what I was thinking. I was scared, you know? I suppose I just flipped. I needed to protect the kids.'

'But you know I'd never lay a finger on my kids,' said Dad. He yanked Kendall onto his lap and tickled him. 'I love this kid of mine to pieces, can't you see that?'

I felt as if I was falling down a tunnel. Dad was acting like he only had one kid. What about *me*? And what about the last time we'd been together? He didn't just lay a finger on me. He clenched his fist and punched me on the jaw, nearly knocking me out.

I stared at Dad, shouting inside my head. He



looked over at me as if he could hear. He smiled. It was a shark smile.

‘Ah, Jayni,’ he said, as if he’d just clapped eyes on me. ‘Aren’t you going to give your old dad a kiss and tell him you’re pleased to see him?’

Mum held her breath, staring at me pleadingly.

I pretended for her sake.

I pretended for my sake too, because I was scared out of my wits. I wanted to run right out the room, down the stairs, down the road, run away for ever. But I walked up to my dad. He put his arm round me. His lips nuzzled my ear, my neck.

‘That’s my good little girl,’ he whispered. ‘Was it you who put your mum up to all this, eh?’

I didn’t know what to say. I started shaking.

‘Hey, are you shivering? You shouldn’t be cold in that natty furry jacket. Nice little bit of clobber, that. So where’s my fancy jacket, eh?’

‘We’ll buy you one, darling,’ said Mum.

So she hadn’t let on that the money was all gone.

‘That’s my babe. And my boy and my girl. My family, safely come back to me,’ said Dad, arms round us all. Imprisoning us.

Auntie Barbara was standing free, watching us. She had her arms folded across her chest, hands gripping her elbows as if she was trying to hold herself in. She was looking at Mum like she couldn’t quite believe it. Mum wouldn’t look back at her.



But Dad did.

‘So, Barbara,’ he said. ‘You were telling me porky pies when I came round to your pub.’ He put his head on one side, puffing out his cheeks, his voice a silly high-pitched imitation. *‘Oh no, believe me, Jay, I haven’t got a clue where Nikki is. I haven’t seen her for years. The last time I saw the kids Kenny was a baby.’*

‘That was true, Jay,’ Auntie Barbara said steadily. ‘I didn’t even have *your* address.’

‘Liar!’

‘You can call me all the names you like. I’m used to it.’

‘Ooh, what sort of names do you get called, little Barbie?’

‘I’m sure you’re familiar with most of them,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘I’ll go and make us all a cup of tea, eh, Nikki? How are you feeling?’

‘Fine,’ said Mum. She looked grey underneath her make-up. ‘Barbara just came to look after the kids when I had to go into hospital for the op.’

‘So who called her then?’ said Dad.

I stayed very still.

‘I did,’ said Mum.

‘Why didn’t you call *me*? They’re my kids, for God’s sake.’

‘I know, darling, but I thought you might be freaked out by the whole hospital bit. Barbara, I’d love that cup of tea—’

‘Yeah, OK, Barbie, you pop the kettle on like Polly, and then you can pop off back to your



pub,' said Dad. 'We don't need you now. We're going home too.' He peered round the room, sniffing. 'Whatever made you pick this dump, Nik? Are you sure this tumour isn't in your head?'

'There's no tumour anywhere, darling. They've dug it all out of me. I'm as good as new,' said Mum.

'I hope so, babe. I couldn't bear it if you had to have one of your lovely boobies chopped off.'

'That's a really helpful attitude,' said Auntie Barbara.

We all tensed. Dad pushed Kendall so he slid off his lap.

'She didn't mean it to sound like that, Jay,' said Mum.

'What do you think I am, thick? Don't look so worried, babe. Jayni, stop that silly shivering. It's OK. I'm not going to blow my top. Even with your fat freak of a sister. Hear that, Barbie? You trot off back to Big Daddy.'

'He's dead and gone,' said Auntie Barbara, 'and I don't think any of us should trot off tonight. Nikki's exhausted. She needs to rest. And she has to go back to the hospital next week for the results of her tests.'

'What tests?' said Dad. 'I thought you said the tumour had gone, Nik?'

'It has, it has,' said Mum. 'They cut it all out. I'm fine now. Just a bit tired.' Her voice cracked and tears started dribbling down her cheeks.

'Don't cry, sweetheart, you know I can't bear



it,' said Dad. He pulled her close so her head was against his chest. 'There there, my little babe. It's OK, your Jay's here now. He'll take care of you.'

He stroked her hair and kissed the tip of her nose as if she was a little girl. Mum hung onto him.

'Oh Jay, you promise? You really will take care of me?'

'I swear I will, darling. You can count on me. You're my little babe and I'm going to keep you safe. Now you lie back. No wonder you're tired. I'll tuck you up, eh? You could do with a little nap. We'll stay here for the night if that's what you want. We'll get you back home tomorrow. I'll carry you in my arms if necessary. I'd carry you clear across the world, babe. You mean all the world to me. I was ready to top myself when you left. But I don't blame you, sweetheart. I'm not angry any more. You were obviously getting sick already, not thinking straight. You panicked, I know. I understand. But now you can relax. We're going to start all over again, you and me and our little lad.'

'And Jayni,' Mum said.

'And Jayni,' Dad said.

I hated the way Dad was looking at me. I couldn't be his little girl any more. He thought it was all my fault.

Maybe it *was* my fault.

My head felt as if it was being crushed. I couldn't hear, I couldn't see, I couldn't think.



Then I felt those two steady hands on my shoulders.

‘Come and help me make the tea, Jayni,’ said Auntie Barbara.

She steered me out into the kitchen. I leant against her. She wrapped her arms round me, bending over.

‘You can come and live with me if you like,’ she whispered.

‘He wouldn’t let me.’

‘We’ll work it out somehow. I’m not going to let him hurt you, I promise.’

‘But he’ll hurt *Mum*.’

‘Maybe they’ll work something out,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘Maybe he really will take care of her. Maybe this is his last chance and he’s taking it.’

When we went back into the living room Dad was trying hard, plumping up the pillows behind Mum and straightening the covers on the sofa bed.

‘That’s my girl,’ he said. ‘There! Is that comfier?’

‘Yes, Jay, much.’

‘We’ll tuck you right up, eh?’ Dad said tenderly. ‘Let me take your jacket off. There now, don’t worry, I won’t hurt your poor chest. My brave little babe, you never make a fuss, do you? Well, you’re not ever going to get hurt again, I promise. We’ll tuck you up tight and you can have a lovely long snooze.’

‘You’re so good to me, Jay,’ Mum said.



‘That’s right, babe. No one’s ever looked after you the way I do,’ said Dad, tucking the cover in firmly.

He felt something stuck under the mattress. He pulled it out. He held something crumpled and blue. He looked at it incredulously. ‘What the bloody hell are these?’ he said.

Dad held the blue boxer shorts out and waved them in the air, so that the legs flapped. It looked comical but no one laughed. Even Kendall ducked his head, elbows pressed against his sides.

Mum stared at the shorts helplessly.

‘What are they?’ Dad asked.

‘They’re underpants,’ Mum whispered.

‘Yeah. Right. I can see they are,’ said Dad, holding them out, practically thrusting them in Mum’s face. ‘That’s not really the issue, is it, Nikki?’

Mum swallowed.

‘*Is it?*’ Dad yelled.

‘Don’t shout, darling, please,’ Mum begged.

‘I’ll shout my head off until you tell me whose pants these are,’ said Dad.

They were obviously Jake’s. I hated him for being so careless, so forgetful.

‘They’re Kendall’s,’ I blurted out.

‘Oooh. *Kendall’s*, are they?’ said Dad. ‘Why the fancy name, Kenny?’

Kenny tried to shrug, his shoulders wiggling.

‘Are they your pants, *Kendall*?’ said Dad. ‘Bit big for you, aren’t they?’ He held up the boxer



shorts. They'd have reached right down to Kendall's ankles.

'I think you're telling me porky pies, Jayni,' said Dad.

'Leave the kids out of it,' said Auntie Barbara. 'For God's sake, what does it matter whose stupid pants they are? Forget it, let's have our tea.'

She passed Dad a mug but he batted it away, so that hot tea sprayed everywhere, spattering Auntie Barbara's Thai silk two-piece.

'Whoops!' said Dad. 'Aha! Are they *your* pants, Barbie? No, I don't think so. A little on the small side this time.'

'You're labouring the point, Jay,' said Auntie Barbara, dabbing at her wet wrap-around.

'Too right I am. I want an answer.' Dad scrunched the pants up and wiped them round Mum's face like a flannel. 'Whose are they, Nikki?'

'I don't know,' Mum whispered.

'You don't *know*? So you've had so many men taking their clothes off since you've been here you've lost track, have you?'

Mum shook her head, clutching her sore chest. 'Jay, I'm sorry. Please don't be angry. There was just the one guy,' she wept.

'You slag,' Dad yelled. He raised his hand, his fist clenching.

I ran towards Mum.

Auntie Barbara was quicker. Her own fists were clenched. She didn't hit Dad. She *kicked*



him. Her foot shot up in its big purple suede sandal. She kicked him hard, right in the crotch. Dad gasped and doubled up. Auntie Barbara balanced herself on the balls of her feet, ready for when he got up.

Dad got to his knees, clutching himself.

‘You raise your hand one more time to Nik or the kids and I’ll kill you,’ said Auntie Barbara.

Dad staggered to his feet, his face contorted. He grabbed the tea mug and smashed it against the wall. Then he turned and came at Auntie Barbara again, the broken shards clutched in his hand. He went for her face – but she whirled her arm and chopped him hard on the shoulder with the side of her hand. He swayed, dropping the broken mug, his mouth open.

‘I mean it, Jay,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘Now get out. Get out of this flat. Get out of their lives.’

Dad looked at Mum.

‘I’m sorry, Jay,’ she sobbed. ‘Just go now. Please.’

Dad stood there, sobbing with rage. He looked round at all of us – and then he ran out, slamming the door behind him. We heard Miss Parker downstairs calling out, complaining at the noise. The front door slammed harder.

Then there were footsteps and a banging on our door. We all thought Dad was back but it was Andy and Steve from upstairs.

‘You OK, Victoria? We heard the ruckus.’

Steve had grabbed an umbrella, Andy a saucepan. They weren’t great weapons,



especially not for a fight with my dad. But Auntie Barbara had beaten him! She stood in the middle of the room, breathing hard, tidying her purple top.

'We're fine now, but thanks so much for coming to protect us.'

Steve and Andy were obviously dying to stay and find out what had been going on, but Auntie Barbara gently but firmly told them Mum needed to rest now. They shuffled back upstairs obediently.

'I think we need a fresh pot of tea,' said Auntie Barbara. She looked at Kendall. He'd wet himself he'd been so scared. 'And you need a change of trousers, Kendall. OK, Lola Rose. I'll do the tea, you do the trousers.'

I looked over at Mum. She had her head buried in her hands. I hesitated.

'Let Mum have a little cry,' said Auntie Barbara.

I took Kendall into the bathroom. He started crying too.

'I'm a baby. I wet myself!'

'No, it's OK, Kendall. *I* nearly wet myself. It was so scary.'

'That man *was* Dad, wasn't he?'

'Of course he was.'

'I remembered him different,' said Kendall.

'Yes.'

'He shouted at me.'

'He shouted at everyone.'

'I thought he was going to hurt us. But then



Auntie Barbara hurt him!’ Kendall wriggled out of his wet trousers and kicked his leg in imitation. He waved his arm, nearly whacking me on the head as I washed him.

‘Watch out, Kendall!’

‘*You* watch out, Lola Rose, or I’ll go kick-chop-thump like Auntie Barbara.’

‘How did she *do* that?’

I was glad Kendall had seen it too, otherwise I’d have wondered if I’d imagined it. Already Auntie Barbara seemed to fly through the air in my memory, arms and legs whirling, like a martial arts movie.

‘*Thai* martial arts,’ said Auntie Barbara, when we asked her. ‘I went to see Thai boxing when I was in Thailand. It’s amazing. They do it to music and they use so many parts of their bodies as weapons – their fists, elbows, knees, shins and feet. When I came back I saw there were some Thai boxing evening classes. I went along just to watch, but I ended up joining in. I’d done some judo before so it wasn’t like I was starting completely from scratch.’

‘You joined in just like that? You are brave, Auntie Barbara.’

‘No I’m not. I used to be scared to say boo to a goose when I was your age.’

Mum sniffled. ‘You were Daddy’s little darling.’

‘*Big* darling.’

‘You’re so big you can even beat my dad,’ said Kendall.



'Will you really kill him if he comes back?' I asked.

'No! Look, I'm thinking of becoming a Buddhist. They don't believe in killing anything, not even little creepie-crawlies.'

'But you *could* kill him if you wanted? If he was really really hurting us?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Auntie Barbara, can you stay with us for a bit, *please*? Just in case Dad comes back?'

Auntie Barbara looked at Mum. 'I don't think your mum wants me to stay,' she said. 'But she hasn't got much choice. It looks like you're stuck with me.'



## Twenty One



## Treatment

Mum cried and cried. I couldn't work out why. Auntie Barbara had rescued us! Mum didn't *still* want Dad back, did she? She'd been just as scared as we were.

I asked Auntie Barbara.

'I expect she's just worn out with everything, pet,' she said.

'She *is* better, isn't she? They *did* get all the tumour out?'

'Yes, I think so. But she might have to have some treatment.'

'What treatment?'



'Let's just wait and see, shall we?' said Auntie Barbara.

'But she is going to be all right, isn't she?'

'I hope so, darling.'

'You promise?'

Auntie Barbara wavered. 'I wish I could promise you that, Lola Rose,' she said.

Mum seemed fine the next day. When Kendall and I came home from school she was looking lovely, her hair newly coloured and styled. She was wearing her white jeans, but now they had embroidered pink roses up and down the seams.

'Has Jake been here?' I asked.

'Has he heck,' said Mum. 'I did them. You're not the only one who can be creative, Lola Rose.'

'They look lovely, Mum. *You* look lovely.'

'Do I?' said Mum, preening. 'Well, I've got to tart myself up. I'm going job-hunting tomorrow.'

'Why don't you wait a bit, Nikki?' said Auntie Barbara. 'Give yourself time to get better.'

'*I am* better,' said Mum. 'And I need a job as soon as possible. I've got to feed these kids.'

'I can take care of the bills for a bit,' said Auntie Barbara.

'I don't want you to,' said Mum. 'Haven't you been lecturing me all day about standing on my own two feet and not depending on anyone?'

'I don't *lecture*,' said Auntie Barbara, giving Mum a tiny push. 'And you'll never be able to stand on your two feet, not wearing those ridiculous high heels.'

Mum blew a raspberry at Auntie Barbara. 'Nag nag nag.'



‘Whinge whinge whinge,’ said Auntie Barbara.

Mum pulled a hideous face.

Auntie Barbara pulled a worse one.

They were like two silly kids.

‘Aren’t they childish, Kendall,’ I said, winking.

I started singing Mum’s ‘Lucky’ song as I helped get tea ready – steak and chips and a watercress salad to build Mum up, and then strawberries and cream. I washed the watercress and took the stalks off the strawberries and whipped the cream. Kendall licked the bowl, singing the ‘Lucky’ song too. Mum joined in *and* Auntie Barbara.

I thought she’d have a great big powerful singing voice, but she sounded sweet and girly, just like Mum. They started singing all these daft duets together. Mum didn’t have the energy to dance but she took off her high heels and kicked them up and down in the air.

Auntie Barbara *did* dance, larking about, light on her toes in spite of her bulk. She picked Kendall up and danced with him. Then it was my turn. She whirled me round and round the room until Mum and Kendall blurred, and the room whirled with me.

I felt so happy then, eating my treat tea, sure we really were lucky lucky lucky.

Mum still had to go back to hospital to get the results of her tests. Auntie Barbara went with her. I hoped they might come to meet us from school. I wanted them to be waiting by the gate with big smiles on their faces. But they weren’t there.



Kendall and I walked home with Harpreet and Amandeep. I nattered to Harpreet – all sorts of stupid stuff about boys and football and rock stars – but all the time I was chanting inside my head. *Let her be all right, please please please.*

I tried not to walk on any cracks in the pavement in case it was bad luck.

‘Are your shoes hurting you?’ Harpreet asked.

‘No.’

‘So why are you walking funny, picking your feet up like a pony?’ said Harpreet.

‘Am I?’ I threw back my head and neighed. ‘Give me a carrot. And a sugar lump.’

‘You’re nuts,’ said Harpreet, giggling.

‘I’m a shark, not a pony,’ said Kendall. ‘Watch me, Amandeep.’

He held his arm out like it was part of his head, opened his mouth as wide as it would go, and circled round us.

‘Shut your mouth, Kendall, we can see your tonsils,’ I said. ‘Hey, Harpreet, you should see my Auntie Barbara do her whale imitation.’

‘I like your auntie. So where is she today?’

‘She’s with my mum,’ I said. My voice went wobbly.

Kendall looked at me. He stopped being a shark. He put his hand in mine and hung on tightly all the way home.

I knew it was bad news the moment we got in the door. Mum was hunched up on the sofa, chin on her knees, all her make-up cried away. Auntie Barbara tried to smile at us but her eyes were red too.



‘Oh Mum!’ I cried.

She held out her arms and we went rushing to her. She cuddled us close, while Auntie Barbara hovered.

‘It’s awful news,’ said Mum. ‘The lump *was* cancer, and now it’s advanced. And it was in all the lymph nodes under my arm too. So I’ve got to have chemotherapy so I shall puke all the time and I’ll probably lose all my *hair*.’ She started weeping again.

‘You’ll look funny without hair,’ said Kendall.

‘Shut *up*. Mum will still look pretty no matter what,’ I said fiercely. ‘Just so long as she gets better.’

‘But will I get better?’ said Mum.

‘Of course you will,’ said Auntie Barbara.

‘And I could just as easily say of course I *won’t*,’ said Mum. ‘Do you know what the odds are, Lola Rose?’

‘Nikki, stop it. You shouldn’t tell her all this.’

‘Look, she’s my daughter. I’ll tell her what I want. I don’t have secrets from my kids. I’ve got a fifty-fifty chance, Lola Rose, even if I let them do all this chemo and radiation treatment. Fine sort of Lady Luck I am.’

I felt as if the Voice of Doom had burst out of my head and was booming the bad news from a loud-speaker. It was so loud I couldn’t think of anything else.

Kendall didn’t seem to understand properly and whined to watch television. He wouldn’t eat his tea and got very boisterous at bedtime, leaping about



all over the place, refusing to put his pyjamas on. Mum yelled at him. Kendall burst into tears and wouldn't stop. He screamed for hours until we were exhausted.

When he finally settled, still snuffling in his sleep, Mum got Auntie Barbara to go down to the off licence for a couple of bottles of wine. She drank steadily, swallowing the wine as if it was medicine, until her head lolled and her eyes closed.

'Time you were asleep too, Lola Rose,' said Auntie Barbara.

'I don't think I can,' I said.

'Come here.' Auntie Barbara held me tight. I couldn't feel safe even with her arms round me.

'It's so *unfair*,' I mumbled into her shoulder.

'I know, I know.'

'I hate feeling scared all the time.'

'It's awful, isn't it.'

'I just want Mum to be better and Dad to stay away and for us to be happy, just like anyone else. And – and it's so bad of me, but I feel so cross with *Mum*.' I burst out crying. 'I know it's not her fault, she can't help having cancer, but it's like she's spoiling everything. Oh God, I'm sorry, I shouldn't say that. It's wicked. *I'm* wicked.'

'No, you're just worn out with worrying, darling. You're not wicked at all, you're the best girl ever. I'm so proud of my special niece. This is the one great thing for me, you know. I've met up with you and Kendall again.'

'Will you really stay with us?'



‘I’ll have to nip back home soon to sort out the running of the pub and get some more clothes and go to my bank but I’ll come straight back, I promise. I’ll be here for you, Lola Rose, no matter what.’

I put my hands either side of her big, sweet face. Her blue eyes stared straight back at me. I knew she really meant it. I leant against her and knew I loved her.

Mum’s treatment frightened me. She had to go to the hospital to have the chemicals dripped into her. Auntie Barbara stayed with her and drove her home. Then the sickness started. She had to have a bucket in bed because she couldn’t always get to the toilet in time. They gave her more drugs to stop the sickness but she still *felt* sick, yawning all the time, all white and sweaty and sad.

‘I’m being bloody poisoned,’ she groaned. ‘I’m sick of puking all over the place. I’m not going back to that hospital. I’m not going through with all this.’

‘Yes, you are,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘You’re going to have all the treatment and get better, do you hear me?’

‘I’d sooner take my chances,’ said Mum. ‘Poor as they are.’

‘Yes, but you can’t just think of yourself. There’s the kids.’

‘They’ll be better off without me,’ said Mum.

‘No we wouldn’t!’ I cried. ‘We need you, Mum.’

‘And I need you, darling,’ said Mum. ‘I love you,



sweetheart, and little Kendall. I haven't always been a good mum to you. Do you think getting ill like this is a punishment?'

'No! You've been the best mum *ever*,' I said.

'I haven't always been the best sister,' said Mum, as Auntie Barbara held a cold flannel to her head.

'True,' said Auntie Barbara briskly. 'But cancer cells don't start multiplying just because you've been a bad girl in the past. Now stop whining and cuddle down and try and get some sleep.'

'Bossyboots,' said Mum. Then she reached out and grabbed Auntie Barbara's hand. 'I'm sorry, Barbs. For everything.'

'I know. It's OK. It was all over ages ago. You actually did me a favour.'

'What favour? What did you do, Mum?' I asked.

'Never mind. Forget it,' said Auntie Barbara.

'I can't forget it. What if I'm going to die? I don't want to go to hell!' Mum wept.

'You're not going to die. Not yet. Not for years and years and years,' said Auntie Barbara firmly. 'And what's all this hell nonsense?'

'Dad said I'd go to hell.'

'Oh well, Dad was a warped old beggar.'

'I thought you and Dad were always so thick. You were always the favourite,' said Mum.

'Why did Grandad say you'd go to hell, Mum?' I persisted. 'Because you ran off with Dad?'

'I ran off with Barb's boyfriend first,' said Mum. I stared at Auntie Barbara.

'He was her fiancé. Michael. They had the wedding all planned, honeymoon booked,



everything finalized. And I was going to be the bridesmaid,' Mum howled.

'In a lilac dress with freesias in your hair,' said Auntie Barbara. 'And I was going the whole hog, marrying in ivory lace, with a bouquet of purple freesias and white roses. I was much too big for white lace even in those days but I was on a strict diet, scheduled to lose three stone in three months. Yep, it was all planned, every detail.'

'You didn't plan for me to ruin it all,' said Mum. 'I didn't even *like* him much. I thought he was a bit boring really.'

'He *was* boring,' said Auntie Barbara. 'I always knew exactly what he was going to say.'

'But you didn't know what he was going to *do*.'

'Well, certainly, he didn't seem the type to go after my little sister.'

'Did you love him, Auntie Barbara?' I asked.

'Maybe I thought I did. At the time,' she said, sighing.

'I didn't mean things to get out of hand,' said Mum. 'I was just having a little flirt with him. Only things kind of escalated.'

'You were only sixteen. You were just messing about. I blamed Michael more than you.'

'Why wouldn't you take him back? He begged you. He never really stopped loving you, couldn't you see that?'

'I'm not so sure. Anyway, it was beside the point. I stopped loving *him*. I didn't want him any more.'

'Maybe you'll meet someone else, Auntie Barbara,' I said.



'I don't think I want anyone now,' said Auntie Barbara. 'I like being on my own, totally independent. I *would* have loved children though.'

'Well, you can share mine,' said Mum. 'And if I don't make it—'

'Stop it.'

'You *will* make it, Mum.'

'If. You'll look after the kids, Barbs?'

'You know I will.'

'Jay might make more trouble.'

'I'll sort him out,' said Auntie Barbara. 'And I'll sort you out too if you don't stop rabbiting. You need some sleep.'

Mum kept to her bed for a few days. We tiptoed round the flat. Kendall had to keep the television turned right down. We couldn't always turn *him* right down too. He kept crying over the slightest thing.

'Couldn't you try to be a good boy, Kendall?' I begged him.

'No, I want to be bad,' said Kendall.

He kept pestering me while I was working on a very special get well card for Mum. I'd designed a beautiful country landscape with bluebirds and apple blossom and newborn lambs and a stream with white swans. I'd cut out four figures walking into the sunset hand in hand – Mum, Kendall, Auntie Barbara and me. I used up the whole of a Cadbury's chocolate wrapper for Auntie Barbara's purple party frock. I stuck little pink feathers round Mum's shoulders to make a furry jacket and sequins on her feet for sparkly shoes.



I stuck her a bit too high up, so that she floated a few inches above the ground even after I turned her shoes into very high stilettos. The feathers looked a bit odd too. They looked too much like angel's wings.

'Let me see,' said Kendall. 'Let George see too, Lola Rose.'

'Look, get that filthy toy out of my face,' I said irritably. George was covered in jam and glue and general grime. 'He needs a wash.'

'He doesn't like washes. He wouldn't mind a proper swim though. Can we go and see the real George soon, Lola Rose?'

'No, of course we can't. Not with Mum so ill.'

'Auntie Barbara could take us.'

'She's looking after Mum, you know she is.'

'*You* could take us.'

'Oh yeah, sure.'

'Why won't you? Is it because you're scared?'

'Shut *up*, Kendall. Quit bugging me. Go and see if Mum's awake and wants a drink.'

Auntie Barbara was taking a nap too because she'd been up with Mum half the night.

'I don't want to see Mum. She's scary now.'

'Don't be silly.'

'She could be sick on me.'

'No, she won't. I think she's stopped being sick now.' She'd eaten boiled eggs and toast and then soup for lunch and kept them all down.

I warned Kendall I'd throw George in the rubbish if he dared touch my get well card and went to check on Mum myself. She was



propped up on her pillows, having a cigarette.

‘You shouldn’t be smoking, Mum!’

‘Why? Will it give me cancer?’ she said, laughing at me.

Auntie Barbara stirred. She was wedged tightly into the armchair, her head resting on her arms.

‘I think she’s stuck there for ever!’ Mum whispered. ‘She’ll have to walk round with a great big chair stuck on her bum.’

‘Mum! You are dreadful!’

‘Yeah, yeah. Hey, Lola Rose, I’m starving. What can I have to eat?’

‘I could make you boiled egg and soldiers.’

‘I’m sick of all that kiddie muck. How about running down the chippy, eh?’

We still didn’t have any money of our own so I had to take Auntie Barbara’s purse out of her bag. I knew she wouldn’t mind.

I skipped like a little kid down the road to the chip shop. I came charging out holding a big, warm, greasy bag of chips – and barged straight into Ross.

‘Hey, it’s little Lola Rosy Posy. Coming for a snog, then?’

‘No thanks,’ I said dodging past.

I ran up the road, my feet barely touching the pavement, like Mum’s stilettos in my picture. Mum seemed so much better. She was over the worst now. Wasn’t she?’



## Twenty Two



# Terror!

I woke in the middle of the night. I could hear footsteps, whispering, groaning. I slid out of bed and ran into the living room.

‘Is Mum sick again?’

Auntie Barbara was bending over Mum. ‘She’s very hot,’ she said. ‘Put the light on, Lola Rose, so I can have a look at her.’

I put the light on. Mum seemed OK at first glance, pink cheeks, bright eyes. Too pink, too bright.

‘She’s got a fever. I think we’d better get her to the hospital,’ said Auntie Barbara.



'No, no, I hate that hospital,' Mum mumbled.

'You're ill, lovey. You need to get that fever down,' said Auntie Barbara. 'Help me bundle her up, Lola Rose. I'm going to drive her to the hospital.'

I wrapped the duvet round Mum. She was burning hot but shivering.

'What the bloody hell is wrong with me now?' she wailed.

'It'll be your white blood cells. I've been reading up about cancer treatment,' said Auntie Barbara, wringing out a cold flannel and putting it on Mum's forehead. 'The chemo's knocked them for six so you haven't got any resistance to infection.'

'You're such an old brainbox,' said Mum. 'So what happens next, Dr Barbs? Is it curtains?'

'Of course not! You're such a drama queen. You'll be better in no time,' said Auntie Barbara, though she didn't sound too sure.

'Kiss Mum goodbye, Lola Rose.'

I kissed both her hot pink cheeks. 'You *are* going to get better, Mum. You have to.'

'Yeah. We wish,' said Mum.

Auntie Barbara lifted her up in her arms as if she were a baby. She carried her out the front door and down the stairs to the car. I watched from the window as Auntie Barbara got her car door open and stowed Mum carefully in the back seat. They drove off. I watched the red back lights. Then I watched the darkness where they'd been. The Voice of Doom started up.

*That's the last time you'll see your mum.*



'Shut up. That's rubbish. *You're* rubbish. Auntie Barbara said she's going to get better.'

*She would do, wouldn't she? But you know she's wrong. Your mum's going to die.*

'She's not, she's not, she's not,' I said. I put my hands over my ears but it was inside my head.

*She's going to die and there's nothing you can do about it.*

'I'll wish, I'll pray, I'll promise anything.' I thought of all the fairy tales I'd read at school, the dangerous quests, the impossible tasks. 'I'll do anything.'

*Anything at all?*

'Yes, anything!'

*Right. What are you most afraid of?*

'My dad?'

*He doesn't scare you so much now.*

'Then . . . what?'

*What gives you nightmares?*

'Sharks.'

*You got it. So go back to the aquarium. Stand at the shark tank. Lean against the glass so they swim right up close.*

'I can't!'

*Stay there and count sixty seconds. And again and again, sixty times, till you've stayed a full hour.*

'But I'll scream. I'll be sick. I can't!'

*Not even to save your mother?*

I knew the Voice wasn't real. I knew it was me, making it all up. But I couldn't control what it was saying.

I thought of those great fishy heads gliding past,



those awful staring eyes, the rows of jagged teeth. I started shaking as if they were swimming just the other side of the window. I couldn't do it.

Yes I could. It wasn't much to ask. Any other child could do it, easy-peasy. I had to try for Mum.

I went to the sofa bed and buried my face in Mum's pillow, breathing in her sweet, musky scent. Auntie Barbara came back as dawn was breaking. Her face was screwed up. When she saw me she tried to smooth it out into a smile.

'It's OK, Lola Rose. Mum's being looked after in hospital. They're pumping antibiotics into her.'

'I'm not going to school today. We'll come to the hospital, Kendall and me.'

'You can't, my love.'

'Yes we can!'

'No, Mum's being nursed in a side room. You can't see her in case you pass on another infection to her.'

'Did I give it to her then?' I asked, appalled.

'No! Well, it could have been any of us. Your mum's just so vulnerable at the moment.' Auntie Barbara struggled, shutting her eyes. 'I'd give anything to make her better, Lola Rose.'

'Do you love her, Auntie Barbara?'

'Of course I do!' said Auntie Barbara, wiping her eyes.

'But she was awful to you. She stole your boyfriend.'

'Yes she did. She was very naughty even as a little girl. I had a special china doll with a long silky crinoline and a parasol—'



‘I’ve got a picture of one. I love those dolls!’

‘Well, your mum cut off all her golden ringlets and scribbled blue biro tattoos all over her arms. She said she’d turned her into a punk. I made a fuss, even though I was a bit old for dolls by that age. Dad heard me and saw the doll and then he laid into your mum. He was so hard on her. I cried buckets because it was my fault your mum had red slap marks all over her legs. Yes, I’ve always loved her. Like you love Kendall.’

‘I don’t think I’d love him if he mucked up *my* doll.’

‘Yes, you would. You’d *hate* him but you’d love him too. It was awful when I lost touch with your mum. And now that I’ve found her . . .’ Auntie Barbara let her voice tail away. She took a deep breath. ‘I’m so glad I found her. And you and Kendall. Now, darling, we’d better go to bed for an hour or two before we have to get up again for school.’

Auntie Barbara set her alarm clock but didn’t stir when it started ringing. I switched it off quickly. I got Kendall washed and dressed and then organized myself.

‘Where’s Mum?’ he asked. ‘She hasn’t died already, has she?’

‘Kendall! Shh! No, she’s had to go back to hospital because she’s got a fever.’

‘Is she going to die there then?’

‘No! She’s not going to die – how many more times? Now, we’re going to have breakfast *quietly*, OK? We don’t want to wake Auntie Barbara.’



‘But she’ll be late taking us to school.’

‘I’ll take us, like I used to. Auntie Barbara needs to sleep, she’s been up all night.’

Kendall nodded and started eating his breakfast, George on his lap. George got smeared with butter and sprinkled with crumbs. Kendall had dreadful table manners, especially this morning.

‘Don’t suck your toast. It’s not an ice lolly.’

‘You said I had to eat quietly. Toast goes crunch crunch crunch if you bite it,’ said Kendall.

I had to smile at him. At least I was going to be doing him a favour this morning.

I wrote a note to Auntie Barbara telling her we’d gone to school. I sent our love to Mum. Then I let us out of the flat, shutting the door behind us very gradually so it didn’t bang.

Kendall ran down the garden path and turned right.

‘No, this way,’ I said, grabbing his hand.

‘But school’s *that* way.’

‘I know. But we’re not going to school.’

‘Where are we going then? To the hospital to see Mum?’

‘No, we’re not allowed to now. Not till the fever’s gone.’

‘So where *are* we going?’

‘You wait and see.’

I bought two children’s travel cards at the tube station. I was using Auntie Barbara’s money again but there was nothing else I could do.

‘We’re going up to town?’ said Kendall. ‘All on our own!’



'Yes. It's an adventure, OK?'

'It won't get scary, will it?'

'Not for you.'

He didn't know what I was getting at. He didn't twig until we were walking along the embankment.

'This is the way to the aquarium!'

'Yep.'

'Oh, Lola Rose, are you taking me to see George?'

'That's right.'

'But you hate sharks.'

'Yes.'

'You won't go in.'

'I will this time.' Though I wasn't so sure now. I stood still for a moment.

'What's the matter?'

'I feel a bit funny.'

Kendall peered up at me. 'You *look* funny. All whitey-green. Like you're going to be sick.'

'I do feel a bit sick.'

'You'd better wait outside. I'll go in all by myself. *I'm* not scared,' Kendall bragged.

*I knew you wouldn't dare!*

'I'm coming in too.'

I stumbled into the reception area and paid, pretending we were with another family up ahead of us. It was very dark. There were watery sounds all around us, as if we'd dived straight into an ocean. There suddenly seemed no way out. I saw a door but it said STAFF ONLY, NO ENTRY – TRESPASSERS WILL BE FED TO THE SHARKS.



'Come on, it's downstairs,' said Kendall, rushing ahead.

'Wait for me!' I cried, grabbing his hand.

'Your hand's all wet, Lola Rose. Let go.'

'No. Please. Wait, Kendall!'

'I want to see George!'

He jerked his hand free and hurtled down the stairs to the next level. I ran after him, fish wriggling and squirming in tanks on either side of me. Then I saw the great tank looming, crowds gathered round.

'George!' Kendall cried, rushing to the glass.

I cowered at the other side of the walkway, narrowing my eyes until I couldn't see the dark shapes gliding through the water. I couldn't breathe. It was as if I were in the water too, drowning.

I wanted to walk up to the shark tank and spread myself fearlessly against the glass window, but I couldn't, I couldn't.

I heard Kendall calling, 'George! Here, George! Here, boy!' as if he were calling his pet dog. Then I blinked and saw George swimming towards him, his mouth opening wide.

'Kenny!' I screamed.

It looked like he was about to be swallowed whole. I ran towards him, trying to snatch him from those terrible jaws.

'Stop it! Stop grabbing at me! I'm fine. I'm not a bit scared,' Kendall said furiously, pushing me away.

*I was scared. There I was, against the glass,*



George darting past, his cold, alien eyes acknowledging me.

‘It’s me. I’m here. Lola Rose,’ I whispered. ‘I can do it. I can outstare you. You can swim past again and again. You can open your awful mouth and bare all those teeth at me, but I’m not going to move. I’m going to stay here nose to nose with all of you for an entire hour. I’m going to make my mum better, you’ll see.’

I counted the seconds, over and over and over. Kendall watched with me for a while but then he hunched up in a corner, chin in his knees, just waving languidly every time George came into view. He was sometimes stepped on. The shark tank was the major attraction of the aquarium. People kept trying to elbow me out of the way but I stood fast. I wouldn’t even let little toddlers in front of me.

I couldn’t understand why they weren’t all terrified. Some of them grinned at the sharks as if they were goldfish. A few of the adults were scared though, squealing and running away.

I stuck it out as the fish swam round and round and round, never once colliding. The ghost-like stingrays followed each other as if they were doing a slow dance routine. The golden trevallies swam in shoals. The sharks swam independently, as if they were each all alone in the tank, the nurse shark, the zebra shark, the sand tiger shark and the brown sharks.

I watched them, and every single time they swam past my heart thumped and sweat sprang



out on my forehead. I felt sick, I needed the toilet, I couldn't stop shaking – but I stayed there.

I counted each second until I got to three thousand six hundred. Then I moved. I'd made a misty impression against the glass. It looked like a ghost Lola Rose had pushed her way right through the glass and was in the tank swimming with the sharks.

'You're obviously a real shark enthusiast,' said an attendant in a bright yellow T-shirt.

I smiled at him weakly, rubbing my forehead.

'You should come one time when they're being fed.'

I imagined those jaws ripping, chewing, swallowing. I shuddered. 'How do you feed them? You don't get in the tank with them, do you?'

'No. We feed the conger eels in the tank, but not the sharks.'

'You'd end up as food yourself,' I said.

'No, not these babies. We do swim among them sometimes but not when the public's around.'

'You don't!' I didn't know if he was kidding me or not.

'Yes we do,' he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out something white and pointed. 'Shark's tooth!' he said. Then he held out his hand. 'Go on, you can have it, seeing as you're so interested.'

'Really?' My hand closed round the tooth before he could change his mind.

'They're meant to bring you luck.'

'Thank you so much,' I whispered, clenching



the tooth tightly in the palm of my hand.

The attendant walked off with a nod and a wink.

‘What did that man give you?’ Kendall asked.

‘Oh, just a peppermint,’ I said quickly. I put my hand up and pretended to eat it. ‘You don’t like peppermint, do you?’

‘I like Kendal mint cake,’ said Kendall.

‘I do too,’ I said. ‘Come on, we’ll buy you an ice cream because you’ve been so good.’

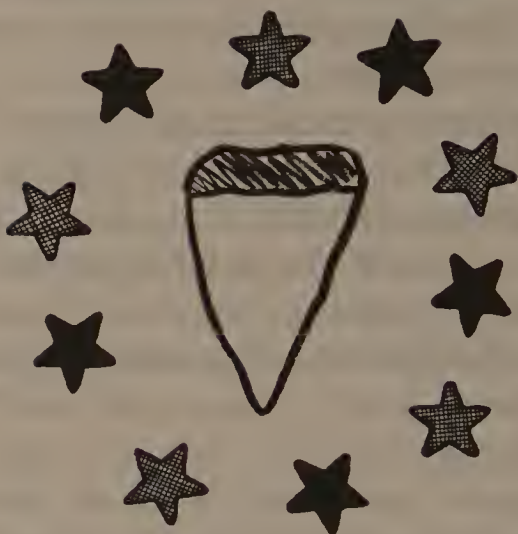
I kept the shark’s tooth hidden in my hand all the way home. I felt mean because I knew Kendall would be thrilled if he knew about it, but he’d want it for himself. I had to keep it safe until I could give it to Mum.

I was sure it was a lucky talisman, able to work magic and make Mum better. I’d endured the hour-long torture of the shark tank. This was a sign that I had completed my task. I had shown the Voice of Doom.

Mum was going to get better.



## Twenty Three



## Lady Luck

Auntie Barbara was out when we got back, obviously at the hospital. I wished we'd stayed up in London. It was a long, long afternoon. Then Auntie Barbara came back at last. I heard her hurrying up the stairs. When she burst through the front door she could barely speak she was so out of breath. Her hair was tumbling out of her ponytail and there were damp patches on her blue shirt.

'Where have you *been*?' she gasped. 'I went to the school to pick you up and you weren't there. Ms Balsam said you hadn't been at school at all



today. How could you do this to me, Lola Rose – at a time like this?’

‘I’m sorry. I – I had to go to the aquarium. I didn’t want to worry you. I left a note.’

‘Don’t you dare do that ever again!’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘You went to the *aquarium*? For goodness’ sake, hasn’t Kendall been there enough times already?’

‘It wasn’t for Kendall. It was for me. To make Mum better,’ I said. ‘She is better, isn’t she, Auntie Barbara?’

I held the shark tooth so that it dug into my palm. Auntie Barbara looked at me. She was struggling. Then tears started splashing down her flushed face.

‘No, she’s worse,’ she said, starting to sob. ‘They can’t get her temperature down. The antibiotics don’t seem to be working. That’s why I came to collect you. You’re not allowed to see Mum but I thought you could call to her from the corridor.’

‘She’s dying, isn’t she?’ said Kendall.

‘No!’ I said.

‘Maybe she might be dying, Lola Rose,’ said Auntie Barbara. She put her arm round my shoulder.

‘She can’t be! I made her better! I stood right next to the sharks. They swam right up close, but I didn’t run away. I’ve got the magic tooth. She *can’t* be dying!’ I sobbed. ‘What did I do wrong? Should I have stayed longer? *What?*’

‘Stop it, Lola Rose. You haven’t done anything



wrong. You haven't made Mum ill – and you can't make her better, no matter what you do.'

'I *can*. I've tried so hard. I've got the lucky shark's tooth, look!'

'Let me see! Where did you get it? I want it,' Kendall cried, trying to snatch it.

'It's *Mum's*,' I said, holding it high above his head.

'Then we'll go and give it to her,' said Auntie Barbara. 'But it's a present, Lola Rose. It's not magic. It can't make her better.'

'It can!'

'Well ... we can give it a go,' said Auntie Barbara. 'I'm going to have the quickest wash and change ever, kids, OK? Ready in five minutes.'

I decided to change too. I put on my best black top and purple velvet skirt. It was too hot for a furry jacket but I wore it anyway. I dressed Kendall in his black leather jacket although he complained. And he went on and on about the shark's tooth.

'I keep telling you, Kendall, it's for Mum. But when we go back to the aquarium I'll ask for one for you.'

'*Not* when you're meant to be at school,' said Auntie Barbara, bright pink from her quick bath. She wore her purple Thai silk two-piece edged with silver braid and her silver flip-flop sandals.

'You look lovely, Auntie Barbara.'

'Thank you, Lola Rose. So do you. And you *tò*, Kendall. OK, have you got your shark's tooth? Right then, darlings. Off we go.'



We met Andy and Steve coming up the stairs.

‘You look like you’re going to a party,’ said Steve.

The Voice of Doom bellowed through the banisters. *A farewell party.* I clutched my shark’s tooth so hard all the way to the hospital that it scored a deep red scratch on my palm.

‘It’s bitten you,’ said Kendall.

We trailed along endless polished corridors. Kendall’s sandals squeaked, my heels tapped and Auntie Barbara’s flip-flops slapped at every step. When we got to Mum’s ward Auntie Barbara made us wait while she went into the side room where they were now nursing her.

We waited a long time. I took Kendall’s hand.

‘That’s not the shark’s-tooth hand, is it? I don’t want it to bite me too.’

‘It’s in my other hand. It’s OK.’

‘It isn’t OK, is it, Lola Rose?’ Kendall said, weaving his fingers into mine. ‘What have they done with our mum? Why won’t they let us go and see her?’

‘We might be too germy. But Auntie Barbara says we can call to her. Shall we try calling now?’

‘What will we say?’

‘Anything. Stuff like “We love you, Mum. Get better soon.”’

‘I shall feel silly, calling out,’ said Kendall. ‘All these ill people will stare at us.’

‘We’ll go right up close, by the door. Come on.’

We walked to the door of Mum’s side room. It was half open. I peeped round fearfully. Mum



was there in the bed, but she had a mask over her face and tubes running in and out of her. I could only be sure she was Mum because of the blonde hair tumbled on her pillow. A nurse was taking her temperature and arguing with Auntie Barbara.

‘It’s more than my life’s worth to let the kids in, you know that,’ she said.

‘What does it matter now?’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘Think of the children. They need to see their mum. And it could just help her. She loves those kids so.’

‘I think she’s out of it already,’ said the nurse.

I started crying and the nurse looked up. She saw me – and then nodded.

‘OK. Quick. Come and see your mum for two minutes. But I’m scooting out of here, right?’

Kendall and I tiptoed towards the bed. Auntie Barbara carefully threaded her arm through all Mum’s tubes and stroked her clenched fist.

‘Nikki, sweetheart, the kids are here. Jayni and Kenny. Lola Rose and Kendall. They’ve come to say hello.’

Mum’s eyes stayed shut. Her hand didn’t unclench.

‘Mum?’ I said. ‘Can you hear me, Mum? Listen, I want you to have this.’ I reached for her clenched hand and gently prised her fingers open. I squeezed the shark’s tooth inside. ‘There! You’ll never guess what it is, Mum. It’s a shark’s tooth, a real one. It’s really really lucky. I



did this hour-long ordeal and it was my reward. It's going to make you better.'

Mum didn't stir.

'I haven't got a shark's tooth to give you but you can have a whole shark if you want,' said Kendall. He thrust grubby George under Mum's arm.

'Did you hear that, Mum? Kendall's given you George,' I said.

'Not for ever and ever,' Kendall said. 'It's just a borrow.'

'But you can keep the shark's tooth. When you're better we could bore a hole in it and hang it on a piece of string round your neck.'

'I'm not wearing a tacky bit of *string*,' Mum mumbled, making us all jump. She opened her eyes.

'You're still alive, Mum!' I sobbed.

'Of course I am. And I'm going to get better. I've got to look after you two, haven't I? Now clear off, kids. I've got a lousy headache and you're doing my head in.'

We kissed her burning forehead, Auntie Barbara, then Kendall, then me. I took George back because I knew Kendall wouldn't be able to sleep without him – and George was a total germtrap too.

'I've made you better, haven't I, Mum?' I whispered.

'*I've* made me better,' said Mum. 'I can do anything. I'm Lady Luck, aren't I?'



## Twenty Four



## Fingers Crossed

Mum's fever went down, but she had to stay in hospital a while. Then she was well enough to come home, though she still had to go for her treatment. First the chemotherapy, weeks of it.

All Mum's beautiful long blonde hair started falling out after the second treatment. It was so scary at first. Kendall and I were cuddled up with her in bed in the morning and when she sat up great long locks of her hair stayed on her pillow.

'Oh my God,' Mum gasped. She put her hands to her head, feeling the bald patches. 'This is just like being in a bloody horror movie!'



‘Never mind, Mum. It’s only a few curls,’ I lied.

Mum’s fingers ran along her scalp, feeling. More hair fell out there and then, fluttering down over her nightie in long pale strands. Mum started whimpering, hanging onto her head with both hands as if she were trying to keep the rest of her hair in place.

Kendall started crying too, his eyes screwed up so he couldn’t see Mum properly.

‘What’s up now?’ said Auntie Barbara, sailing into the room in the great black silky caftan she wore as a nightie.

‘Look!’ Mum wailed.

‘Oh God, your hair, you poor love,’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘Right. I know what we can do. Lola Rose, you’ve got a pair of sharp scissors, haven’t you?’

‘It’s cut-my-throat time, right?’ Mum sniffed.

‘I’m going to cut your hair, Nik.’

‘No! I’ve always had long hair. It’s part of me.’

‘Not any more, darling,’ said Auntie Barbara sadly. ‘Come on, sit on the chair, and we’ll get snipping. It’ll be less strain on the roots if it’s very short. Maybe we’ll be able to keep some of it that way.’

Auntie Barbara cut Mum’s hair really short. I gathered up all the locks and twisted them into a big soft plait and tied it up with purple ribbon.

‘You can pin it back on, Mum,’ I said.

‘It’s not going to work. I look awful. Like a skinhead,’ said Mum, crying.

‘No, you know who you *do* look like, Mum?’ I



said, staring at her ruffled short hair and pale face on her little stalk neck. 'Kendall!'

'Great!' said Mum. But then she wiped her eyes and stuck out her bottom lip and lisped, 'I want George!' Her Kendall imitation was spot on and we all laughed.

Cutting her hair so short didn't really work. It all fell out anyway until poor Mum was completely bald. Her head looked horribly naked. The hospital gave her a wig but it didn't look right and Mum said it itched like crazy. She cut up some of Auntie Barbara's Thai silk into scarves and wound them round and round her head, and then she pinned the plait I'd made her at the back.

'That looks ever so pretty, Mum!' I said.

'Pretty frightful,' said Mum, peering into the mirror and sighing. She puffed out her cheeks. 'And I'm not just an old baldy-bonce. I'm getting *fat*.'

I always thought you got thin when you got cancer. Mum really *was* getting fatter. The chemotherapy drugs gave her a big round face and a big round body too.

'Yuck! Look at me,' she said, struggling to pull her zip up over her stomach. 'I'm going to have to buy some new jeans. New everything.' Even her lovely white jacket was too tight for her. 'You'd better have it, Lola Rose,' she said.

'It's yours, Mum. You'll get thin again when you're better.'

'I don't think I'm ever going to get better. And



what's the bloody point if I end up looking like a freak? I can't *stick* being so fat!

Auntie Barbara sniffed. 'Shut up, skinny. Try being me!'

But Auntie Barbara wasn't quite as fat as she had been. She wasn't on a diet, but she didn't have time to eat so much while she was running around looking after us and rushing back to see to the pub at weekends.

'Maybe I'll fit into real clothes soon,' said Auntie Barbara. 'If so I'll turn my purple silk wrap-around into a bedspread for you, Lola Rose.'

'No, I'll need it. I'm blowing up like a bouncy castle,' said Mum.

'You're not. You're still weeny compared to me,' said Auntie Barbara.

'Well, that's not hard,' said Mum.

'Mum! Don't be mean!' I said.

Mum pulled a face. 'I'm allowed to be mean. I'm the one that's ill. And at least Barb's still got a full head of hair.'

'Yours will grow back, I promise. It'll be as blonde and curly as ever,' said Auntie Barbara, giving Mum a hug. 'Just wait till you've finished your chemotherapy.'

'Then it'll be radiotherapy. Therapy! Is that a fancy word for torture? First they poison you and then they burn you.'

'But they make you better,' said Auntie Barbara. 'Now quit your moaning!'

'You quit your nagging!'



They weren't really arguing. It was just their little game with each other. They started singing their 'Sisters' song, harmonizing beautifully.

'We'll have to do a star turn down The Trout,' said Auntie Barbara.

'Oh yeah, and do a spot of lap-dancing too?'

'I'm serious.' Auntie Barbara looked at Mum, her eyes very blue. 'Why don't you and the kids come and move in with me? You'd go down really great with all my regulars. I'll give you a half share in the pub. You should have had it in the first place. You can help me to modernize it. What do you think?'

I held my breath. Mum's face screwed up. She blinked and tears spilled down her cheeks.

'Yeah, all right,' she said, like she'd just been offered a cup of tea – but she reached out and clasped Auntie Barbara's hands tight.

'What do you think, Lola Rose and Kendall?' asked Auntie Barbara. 'How do you both fancy living in the pub with me?'

'Can I drink beer?' Kendall asked.

'No, but you can drink Coke and have lots of packets of crisps,' said Auntie Barbara. 'And I've got a lovely big pub garden. Tell you what! We could have a little pond with goldfish. I don't think we could have real trout, even though it would be appropriate. And no sharks!'

'Except for my George! Could he swim in it?'

'If he really wants to,' said Auntie Barbara. 'Lola Rose? Would you like to live at The Trout? There's lots of little attic rooms. You could have



your own bedroom. Purple, of course. And there's a big old screen somewhere – maybe you'd like to decorate it with scraps?'

I took a deep breath. She didn't need to try to persuade me. It sounded like a fairy tale. 'It would be wonderful,' I said.

I'm going to miss my friend Harpreet, of course. I've never had a best friend before so it will be horrible saying goodbye. Still, maybe her mum will let her come and stay in the holidays. Mrs Gabriele still doesn't think much of my mum but she approves of Auntie Barbara. She actually invited her in for a cup of tea the other day!

I'll miss Ms Balsam too. I like it at Larkrise, especially the art lessons. Still, I'll have a new school to go to now. I'm going to stay Lola Rose and then maybe I'll make lots of new friends.

I won't miss this house much, though I *will* miss Andy upstairs. He and Steve are getting this new place soon. And Miss Parker might be going into a home. We're all moving on. It's definite now. Mum and Kendall and me are going to live at The Trout. Though it's not going to be called that for much longer.

'I could never stick the name,' said Mum. 'And if we're going to run it together, Barb, we don't want all the guys to call us the two old trouts.'

'So we'll change the name, no problem,' said Auntie Barbara. 'What shall we call it, eh? What about the Singing Sisters?'

'Big Sister and Little Sister,' said Mum. 'Only I'm the blooming Big Sister now.'



‘Stop it!’ said Auntie Barbara. ‘You’ll get your figure back soon enough, you’ll see. Though it’ll be hard for you to go on a diet living at the pub. Wait till you try our Thai green chicken curry!’

We all knew Mum could still pull any bloke she fancied, fat or thin. She’d like it at the pub because she’d meet lots and lots of men. I wish she didn’t need them so much, but she can’t seem to help it. Still, I don’t think she’ll ever want Dad back again.

I don’t really worry about Dad now. Auntie Barbara will protect us if he ever comes back.

I worry about Mum. Even though she’s getting better. She really is. The hospital is very pleased with her progress. Mr Key says her chances are very good now.

I don’t know why. It was probably the treatment. Even though she nearly died after that first week.

She was lucky.

You can’t *make* lucky things happen. You can’t win the lottery every day.

I know it was just chance that Mum got better after I’d endured the shark ordeal. A lucky coincidence. But I still feel good every time I look at the shark’s tooth hanging on the fine silver chain around her neck.

We’re going to live happily ever after, Mum and Auntie Barbara and Kendall and me. Fingers crossed.







When life at home suddenly gets really frightening, Jayni, her mum and her little brother Kenny have to pack their bags and escape in the middle of the night.

They also have to choose new names and so Jayni becomes the glamorous, grown-up Lola Rose!



But Lola Rose's new life isn't quite as wonderful as her new name  
And when Mum has to go into hospital, Lola Rose is forced to be much more grown up than she really feels

'A natural storyteller .  
compulsive reading' *Guardian*

Another brilliantly crafted story of real family life from the prize-winning, children's favourite Jacqueline Wilson – now with a new introduction by the author!

ISBN 978-0-552-56276-8



9 780552 562768

£5.99

Can \$11.95

[www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk](http://www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk)

KN-945-171

